



**TOWARDS A SECURE EUROPEAN AREA IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD:
THE SECURITY - RULE OF LAW NEXUS**

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS FROM INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Skopje, North Macedonia

02-03 June 2025



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Foreword to the Conference Proceedings

On behalf of the Organizing Committee, it is with great pride that I present the official proceedings of our recent conference.

We convened in Skopje during a period marked by the greatest challenges to the global international order since World War II, a time that is putting the European continent to a serious test. Against this backdrop of evolving geopolitical dynamics, the conference provided a vital forum to address the critical nexus between security and the rule of law in the Euro-Atlantic area.

The central theme that resonated through our sessions was the conviction that the rule of law is not merely a moral or legal principle, but a fundamental strategic asset for European security. The vibrant discussions, incisive analyses, and diverse perspectives shared by our participants underscored that without a steadfast commitment to the rule of law, we risk internal fragmentation, weakened alliances, and increased vulnerability to the complex threats of our time—from hybrid warfare to the erosion of democratic institutions.

Our choice of Skopje as the host city, a place at the crossroads of Europe and the Balkans, proved to be an inspiring one. The region's unique experiences provided a poignant context for our debates, enriching our collective understanding.

Throughout the conference, our distinguished speakers and delegates grappled with the key questions of our era: How can we strengthen the rule of law to enhance our collective security? What is the evolving role of international cooperation? And, most crucially, how do we ensure that essential security measures always respect and uphold our fundamental democratic principles?

This volume of proceedings is a testament to the rich intellectual exchange that took place. Within these pages, you will find a curated collection of the papers, research, and expert analyses presented during the event. Each contribution offers a valuable perspective on the intricate challenges and potential solutions we face.

An event of this scale and intellectual depth would not have been possible without the dedication of many. We extend our deepest gratitude to our keynote speakers for their thought-provoking addresses, to all the presenters and panelists for sharing their profound expertise, and to every attendee whose active participation fueled the dynamic dialogue.

It is our sincere hope that these proceedings will serve as a valuable and lasting resource for policymakers, academics, and practitioners alike, extending the important conversations that began in Skopje and inspiring further action towards building a more secure, just, and prosperous Euro-Atlantic area.

Sincerely,

Aleksandar Ivanov

President, Organizing Committee

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CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

02 June 2025

-10:00 Registration of the participants

10:00-10:30 OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

- Zoran Dimitrovski, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trades of North Macedonia
- Igor Nedelkovski, Rector of University "St. Kliment Ohridski" Bitola, North Macedonia
- Jusuf Zejneli, Rector of University of Tetova, North Macedonia
- Petra Drexler, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in North Macedonia
- Ben Nupnau, Deputy Head of the Delegation of the European Union in North Macedonia

**10:00-11:30 PANEL 1
THE EVOLVING SECURITY LANDSCAPE IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD – EU-NATO COOPERATION IN TIMES OF STRATEGIC CHANGE**

- Sebastian von Münchow, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies
- Goran Ilik, University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola, North Macedonia
- Fatmir Xheladini, University of Tetova, North Macedonia
- Elena Tilovska-Kecedji, University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola, North Macedonia

Moderator: Gjeraqina Leka, University of Tetova, North Macedonia

- **Focus:** Examining emerging security threats (e.g., cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, terrorism, and disinformation) and their implications for the Euro-Atlantic area.
- **Key Questions:**
 - How has globalization reshaped the nature of security threats?
 - What are the most pressing challenges to Euro-Atlantic security today?
 - How can states and institutions adapt to these evolving threats?

11:30-12:00 Coffee break

**12:00-13:00 PANEL 2
THE RULE OF LAW AS A FOUNDATION FOR SECURITY IN EU CANDIDATE COUNTRIES**

- Nikola Dujovski, University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola, North Macedonia
- Betim Jahja, South East European University, North Macedonia
- Larisa Vasilevska, University "St. Kliment Ohridski" - Bitola, North Macedonia
- Vasko Naumovski, University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" – Skopje, North Macedonia

Moderator: Viktorija Chavkoska, Ministry of Foreign affairs and foreign trade, North Macedonia

- **Focus:** Exploring the role of the rule of law in ensuring stability, accountability, and trust in institutions.
- **Key Questions:**
 - How does the rule of law contribute to long-term security?
 - What are the consequences of weakening the rule of law in the face of security challenges?
 - How can legal frameworks be strengthened to address modern threats?
 - How can civil society and media hold governments accountable in security matters?

**13:00-14:00 PANEL 3
RUSSIA, THE WEST, AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN SECURITY**

- Massimo Pani, Embassy of the Italian Republic in North Macedonia

- Dalibor Jovanovski, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” – Skopje, North Macedonia
- Albulena Halili, South East European University, North Macedonia
- Ivica Bocevski, Ambassador

Moderator: Zhidas Daskalovski, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, North Macedonia

14:00-15:30 Cocktail lunch, Ground Floor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade

03 June 2025

10:00-11:30 **PANEL 4**
THE FUTURE OF EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Zhidas Daskalovski, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, North Macedonia
- Vesna Poposka, Military Academy “Mihajlo Apostolski”, University “Goce Delchev” - Stip, North Macedonia
- Blerta Ahmed, Southeast European University - Tetova, North Macedonia
- Dimitar Nikolovski, EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies

Moderator: Kire Babanoski, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, North Macedonia

- **Focus:** Looking ahead to the future of security and the rule of law in the Euro-Atlantic area.
- **Key Questions:**
 - What are the most significant trends shaping the future of security?
 - How can the Euro-Atlantic community remain resilient in the face of global uncertainty?
 - How can regional organizations enhance collective security and the rule of law?
 - How can smaller states contribute to regional security efforts?
 - What opportunities exist for innovation and collaboration?

11:30-12:00 Coffee break

12:00-13:00 **PANEL 5**
POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES: REBUILDING SECURITY AND THE RULE OF LAW

- Ivan Blazevski, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” - Skopje, North Macedonia
- Bardhyl Dauti, University of Tetova, North Macedonia
- Milka Dimitrovska, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” - Skopje, North Macedonia
- Liljana Pecovallieska, NGO IMPETUS – Skopje

Moderator: Fatmir Xheladini, University of Tetova, North Macedonia

- **Focus:** Drawing lessons from post-conflict regions on restoring security and institutional trust.
- **Key Questions:**
 - What are the key challenges in rebuilding the rule of law after conflict?
 - How can security sector reform contribute to long-term stability?
 - What role do international actors play in supporting these processes?

13:00-13:30 **CLOSING REMARKS**
TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SECURITY AND THE RULE OF LAW

- Gjeraqina Leka, University of Tetova, North Macedonia
- Aleksandar Ivanov, University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, North Macedonia
- **Focus:** Synthesizing key insights from the conference and outlining actionable recommendations.

13:30-14:30 Cocktail lunch, Ground Floor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade

OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE

ZORAN DIMITROVSKI

Your Excellencies,
Respected members of the faculties,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to address you at the opening of today's Conference, jointly organised by the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola and the State University of Tetovo. On behalf of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and the Ministry, I am pleased to extend a warm welcome to all participants and express appreciation for your engagement in this timely and highly relevant discussion.

As the concept note for the Conference rightly suggests, we find ourselves in a period marked by the greatest challenges to the established international order since the end of the Second World War. The European continent – our shared home – is being tested as never before. The ongoing war in Ukraine, alongside broader geopolitical tensions and uncertainties, has exposed the deep vulnerabilities in Europe's security architecture and placed extraordinary pressure on the entire Euro-Atlantic community to respond in a coherent and principled way.

In this shifting landscape, Europe must make critical choices about its future role. The European Union's ambition to improve its geo-political and geo-economic posture and rise as a more effective global actor is both timely and necessary. We need a strong and determined EU – one that stands firm in defence of the rules-based international order. But we also firmly believe that this aspiration begins here in the Western Balkans – a region that looks up to the EU and genuinely wants to join; a region that already has a high level of integration in terms of trade, investments, energy connectivity as well as in foreign and security policy. That is why the EU's policy towards the Region is in so many ways a litmus test for its global ambition. Acting more convincingly in the WB is therefore a geopolitical imperative – continuation of the current strategic limbo only empowers external actors who thrive on ambiguity, division and instability.

Of course, closer coordination between the European Union and NATO remains essential in this regard. Their complementary mandates – whether in the field of cybersecurity, crisis management, or strategic communication—offer a strong framework for collective action. Strengthening European defence capabilities and resilience must go hand-in-hand with reinforcing transatlantic solidarity and burden-sharing.

The emergence of new, sophisticated threats—ranging from cyber and hybrid attacks to disinformation, misinformation and strategic coercion—has underscored the need for a united and strategic response. The global order is becoming increasingly multipolar, with growing number of state and non-state actors seeking to reshape norms and institutions in ways that erode the foundations of our democratic governance and international law.

The rule of law, in this context, is far more than just a legal or moral ideal—it is a strategic asset for both our national and collective security. It ensures that our responses to emerging threats are not only effective, but also legitimate and aligned with the very ideals and principles that shape our way of life. Without it, our institutions become fragile, our alliances less credible and our societies more susceptible to both external interference and internal erosion.

It is also an integral component of the balance between hard and soft security. While military readiness, intelligence capacity and deterrence remain vital, these elements must be grounded in strong democratic institutions, independent judiciaries and transparent governance. True resilience comes from both our strength to defend against aggression and our commitment towards justice and protection of individual rights and freedoms.

Speaking from a Macedonian point of view, we fully acknowledge that we have same way to go to meet the necessary European standards. There is no easy fix and many challenges remain that we would need to overcome to reach the goal. However, we are committed and working diligently to improve in every area. This is precisely why we need the EU accession process and eventual membership – to guide, support and accelerate our transformation in line with shared European values.

On such note, I would like to once more welcome you and wish you all inspiring and productive discussions over the next two days.

Key message

The role of the EU in establishing and protecting internationally recognised standards in the area of security and rule of law.

Dear Minister Deputy Minister Dimitrovski, dear Ambassador Drexler, dear Rectors, dear organisers and participants,

- It is a great honour to join you today as we reflect on how to secure the Euro-Atlantic area in a world increasingly marked by complexity, interconnectedness—and vulnerability.
- Hybrid threats, disinformation, organised crime, and geopolitical instability challenge our democracies – and, in a way, undermine or erode our values. While some of these challenges are relatively new, the foundation of our collective resilience remains the same - security rooted in the rule of law.
- Our shared objective is clear: a secure, democratic Euro-Atlantic area built on trust in public institutions, effective legal systems, and a professional security sector - that upholds rights, not undermines them. North Macedonia, as an EU candidate country and NATO member, plays a vital role in this architecture.
- For the European Union, security and the rule of law are **inseparable** elements of democratic resilience. Security has many dimensions, be it such as state security, national security, and human security. And it is a responsibility for all of us, as representatives of the State, non-state actors, international stakeholders and individuals.
- The rule of law is the immune system of a democratic state. When corruption infiltrates law enforcement or judicial institutions, it weakens a nation's resilience from within. When courts cannot be trusted, police forces are politicised, regulatory frameworks are deficient, or there are no credible, independent media or non-state actors, the door opens to organised crime, disinformation, and external influence. Conversely, strong and independent judiciary, transparent public administration, and trusted oversight bodies directly bolster a nation's security and democratic stability.
- This is why the EU and partners have been helping to operationalise the security–rule of law nexus in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans.
- **We are supporting the country on judicial reform and in the fight against Corruption and Financial Crime.** Through the “**EU Support for Rule of Law**” flagship project, the EU helps North Macedonia address key reform priorities, including improving the capacities of justice institutions, strengthening the investigative capacities of the institutions fighting terrorism and organised crime, and improving the prevention and fight against corruption.

- **We are supporting the country's Reforms on Security Sector Governance:** Through the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), the EU supports **transparency, civilian oversight, and democratic control of police and intelligence services**.
- We are working together on **improving border control and migration management**, in line with EU and international standards. The actions will support technological investments and equipment, information systems, and improve border security by providing connectivity with relevant regional and international security and police institutions.
- **We are helping the region to counter threats of Small Arms and Light Weapons:** Through several regional projects, the EU is helping the country and the region counter **threats of small arms and light weapons**. In North Macedonia, this has already led to improved firearms registration systems, destruction of surplus weapons, and regional coordination of police operations.
- **We are working together on Cybersecurity and Hybrid Threats:** Security today extends to the digital sphere. The EU and the country are working together on **cybersecurity** and thwarting hybrid threats. A regional initiative is helping the country ensure that its digital infrastructure is not a weak point in our common security architecture.
- **In conclusion**, the Euro-Atlantic area is not merely protected by arms and alliances. It is secured through legitimate institutions, functioning courts, and accountable security services that uphold the rule of law and that serve the people.
 North Macedonia, with consistent EU support, is advancing this vision in tangible ways—from modern police forces to more accountable courts, and from border security to digital resilience. These reforms are not only national investments. And they are strategic contributions to our common vision of a safer and more democratic Europe. Of which North Macedonia is part.

Thank you and I wish you fruitful discussion in the conference.

IGOR NEDELKOVSKI

Good morning, distinguished officials, guests, colleagues, and friends.

It is my great honor, as rector of University “St. Kliment Ohridski” - Bitola, to welcome you to this joint conference what we are organizing together with University of Tetovo.

The established coooperation between our two universities should be a model of functioning of the universities in Macedonia. Cooperation instead Isolation. Joint activites (like this one), joint researches and joint study programmes.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the dedicated organizing committee whose tireless work has made this event possible. I also thank each of you for your presence and your engagement—your insights and your dialogue are what will make this conference truly meaningful. Especially to prof. Ivanov from our Faculty of Security, who initited the idea for this conference at my university.

We are privileged to gather united by a shared commitment to exploring the critical relationship between security and the rule of law in Europe and beyond.

Our world is more interconnected than ever, and with this globalization come both new opportunities and complex challenges. Security concerns and the integrity of the rule of law are at the heart of Europe’s future—affecting not only our institutions, but also the everyday lives of our citizens. This conference provides a unique platform for scholars, policymakers, legal experts, and practitioners to exchange perspectives, challenge assumptions, and seek innovative solutions.

Over the coming days, you will hear from leading voices in law, security studies, and international relations. Through presentations on this conference we aim to deepen our understanding of how robust legal frameworks and effective security policies can reinforce each other, and how they must adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Let us approach these discussions with open minds and a spirit of collaboration. Together, we can help shape a more secure, just, and resilient European area for generations to come.

Thank you.

JUSUF ZEJNELI

Honorable participants in the conference co-organized by the University of Tetova and the University of Bitola,
conference collaborators from the Marshall Center for Security Studies,
local and international diplomats, academic colleagues, participants and representatives of institutions,
Distinguished guests, distinguished colleagues and friends,

I have the honor and pleasure, on behalf of the University of Tetova, to welcome you to this important international conference, which addresses one of the most challenging topics of our time – the nexus between security and the rule of law in an increasingly complex global environment.

The University of Tetova, as a public institution of higher education, has been committed to the fundamental values of democracy, equality and social justice since its establishment, becoming an important center of knowledge, the development of critical thinking and the promotion of interethnic and interreligious coexistence in our society.

In this important mission, the University of Tetova represents a unique model of institutional endeavor, which dignifies the historical sacrifice for the right to education in the Albanian language, with the contemporary commitment to building an open and inclusive society for all. Our academic activity aims not only to reflect on global challenges, but also to offer new and multidisciplinary approaches to cope with the rapid political, social and technological developments, which directly affect the region and our country.

In this context, our efforts for inclusiveness and social cohesion are not just a value, but a strategy for strengthening internal stability and advancing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Republic of North Macedonia.

These conferences, as well as many others that we have organized, or will organize, in collaboration with our partners, such as the “St. Kliment Ohridski” University in Bitola, are evidence of our continued commitment to strengthening institutional capacities and creating an academic space where knowledge, politics and society interact to build a more sustainable future.

Through this continuous commitment, the University of Tetova not only protects and cultivates the linguistic and cultural heritage of Albanians in North Macedonia, but also actively contributes to strengthening the position of the Republic of North Macedonia in the complex process of preparing future cadres who will be the bearers of the processes of full integration of the Republic of North Macedonia into Euro-Atlantic structures.

The University of Tetova remains committed to developing international cooperation as an essential dimension of its mission. This commitment is concretized through bilateral agreements with European and international universities, as well as through active participation in important international programs such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and CEEPUS. In recent years, our

university has built successful partnerships with institutions in Europe and the USA, exchanging academic staff, students and research projects.

The University of Tetova believes in the importance of discussions like this conference, with a multidimensional approach to security in North Macedonia and its Euro-Atlantic Integrations, that the challenges cannot be addressed only through political reforms or various instruments inadequate to the times.

Today, North Macedonia has a much-improved institutional position in its relations in the region, being a member of NATO and, moreover, can benefit more from a positive approach in relation to its neighbors for full integration into the EU.

In this context, we believe that institutional and judicial reforms occupy a central place in building a sustainable democratic order and strengthening the rule of law.

Meanwhile, judicial reforms aim to strengthen the independence of the justice system, fight corruption and increase citizen trust in public institutions.

These reforms are not only necessary for maintaining internal stability and strengthening interethnic coexistence but also constitute a prerequisite for the Euro-Atlantic integration processes. North Macedonia has experience in these 20 years, an important legal and political basis for these reforms, but its implementation requires long-term commitment, transformation of mentalities and the construction of effective mechanisms for the implementation of rights and guaranteeing justice for all citizens.

In this context, we respectfully welcome the topic of this conference, which successfully combines theoretical analysis with the practical needs of our region and continent. We believe that the discussions of this forum will contribute to deepening inter-institutional cooperation and will help strengthen an integrated approach to security and rule of law challenges in an increasingly complex world.

On behalf of the University of Tetova, I thank you for your participation and for responding to our invitation, but above all, thank you for the opportunity for the University of Tetova to be an active part of this important debate.

I wish you good and successful work in this conference of particular importance for the common Euro-Atlantic future.

With special respect!

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Representatives of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies were delighted to attend a conference hosted by University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola (UKLO) and the State University of Tetovo (UNITE). The conference, titled “Towards a Secure Euro-Atlantic Area in a Globalized World: The Security – Rule of Law Nexus”, is a remarkable example of partnership and shared national interest in this multiethnic state. Panelists joined together at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade in Skopje to discuss the pressing security challenges confronting the Euro-Atlantic region.

The conference’s EU-NATO panel identified the need for European collective resilience in response to declining U.S. presence. As U.S. strategic interests shift towards the Indo-Pacific, Europe needs to take greater responsibility for its collective security. The rise of revisionist powers signals a transition from unipolar hegemony to multilateralism, and smaller countries must negotiate their alliances with a plethora of powers. Another significant shift, panelists argued, is the transition from multilateralism to transactionalism. Cooperative engagements based on shared rules and values are gradually being replaced by an interest-based, deal-focused approach. To address these changes, Europe and its allies must develop cogent mechanisms for long-term strategic planning, and prioritise defense flexibility. Allies are hence encouraged to adopt multi-domain preparedness across both traditional domains (land, sea, air) and emerging domains (cyber, hybrid threats). Rapid response capabilities must be enhanced, as the swift deployal of adaptable, interoperable forces is essential for the defensive success of Europe. Panelists called on the EU to invest in collective resilience by strengthening defensive capabilities and partnerships.

The rule of law is the foundation for security, especially in EU candidate countries. The second panel delved into legal, moral and practical interpretations of rule of law. Panelists defined rule of law as the antithesis of authoritarianism. A key element of the doctrine is judicial independence, a precondition for a strong, trustworthy government. The doctrine should be interpreted as a journey towards European integration, as opposed to an idealistic destination. There was a keen sense among panelists that the failure of political parties to secure rule of law has endangered the path to EU integration. They called for Balkan states to align with European security and governance standards, and to avoid pleasing Brussels with superficial reforms.

Panelists turned their attention to the rise of revisionist powers on a panel about Russia and the West. Russia was identified as the core of Western opposition, its stark traditionalism presenting a normative alternative to the liberal international order. Referencing the work of Aleksandr Dugin and Stephen Kotkin, panelists framed Russia as an imperially nostalgic power, capable of exploiting the Western Balkans. Its hybrid strategies, paired with Chinese strategic

interference, have inspired the very populist narratives of sovereignty that encouraged the rise of Eurosceptic political actors in the region. Russia has employed media campaigns to frame itself as a facilitator of stability, humanitarian progress, and technological development in the Balkans. Panelists encouraged Balkan leaders to be wary of this intervention, as it is capable of derailing fragile attempts at European integration. It is crucial to understand the technological dimension of Russia's strategy. This panel explored the cognitive battlefield, and the presence of disinformation and deepfakes in the hybrid threat model. Panelists argued the law must keep up with technical warfare, claiming the recent Digital Service Act and the EU AI Act are not fit to counter disinformation. The rise of artificial intelligence allows nations to broaden the scope of their attacks. European nations must hence bolster their legal apparatus to conduct tactical fixes and restore the disjointed tech-governance loop.

During the second part of the conference, panelists shifted their considerations towards the future of Euro-Atlantic security. Panelists warned against embracing individualism, arguing that identity is to be regained through solidarity. A collective identity will serve as the foundation for strategic autonomy, and it is crucial to prioritise this autonomy over possible commitments to other world leaders. In other words, Europe must turn towards itself. This claim was met with some resistance by certain panelists, who warned against excluding powerful nations from alliances. Such panelists criticised the EU framework for failing to include revisionist power such as Russia, which is intent on creating an alternative security path. They argued Russia was too powerful to be antagonised and excluded. Europe must hence tread a fine tightrope between multilateral diplomacy and strategic autonomy. Encoded in the latter concept is another significant duality: the rise of strategic autonomy and militarism within Europe is coinciding with the rise of far-right populist parties. Panelists enriched this discussion with examples of Swedish and French far-right immigration debates. A final part of this discussion was centred around the future of EU-integration. The future success of the Balkans hinges upon each nation's ability to enhance its rule of law. One panelist notably claimed: 'security without justice is temporary; justice without security is fragile.' If states choose to fight corruption, invest in good governance, and secure their democratic institutions, their claim towards integration will be met with support.

The final panel presented a forward-looking analysis of post-conflict societies. Speakers explored how democracy, law, and civil trust have a direct impact on state security, recognising that equity leads to social order. After the 2001 conflict between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, the Ohrid Framework Agreement sought to guarantee peace through consociational democracy. This framework posited a power-sharing model for the deeply divided society, creating ethnic quotas, veto powers for minority groups, and grand coalitions. Over time, new and sustainable governmental solutions took precedence over rigid consociational democracy. Some speakers championed this transition, arguing for a more unified, functional majority democracy.

Many panelists expressed dissatisfaction towards the Macedonian democratic process, although there are compelling quantitative indicators that suggest progress within democratic institutions. Once more, the rule of law was not framed as a moral or legal ideal but instead as a practical tool for ensuring security. Indeed, one panelist argued the Western Balkans did not initially view NATO membership as a chance to foster proximity with Europe, but rather as a necessity for the region's collective security. Now, NATO is viewed as both the harbinger of security as an impetus for good governance and legal reform aligned with European standards.

These engaging panels remind scholars and practitioners of the fragile, ever-changing landscape of Euro-Atlantic security. Continual attention and innovation with regards to rule of law, the countering of hybrid threats, and defense partnerships are necessary to ensure strategic autonomy in the region. The Western Balkan region must continue to bolster legal foundations, civic awareness initiatives, and social cohesion to foster the political preparedness necessary to follow through on these reforms.

PANELISTS

The NATO-EU strategic partnership is founded on our shared values, our determination to tackle common challenges and our unequivocal commitment to promote and safeguard peace, freedom and prosperity in the Euro-Atlantic area.

- Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The Euro-Atlantic security order is undergoing its most profound transformation since the end of the Cold War. The erosion of unipolar dominance, the resurgence of geopolitical rivalry, and the emergence of new centers of power are reshaping the foundations of global politics. For the European Union and NATO—two of the most influential institutions in the Western world—this new multipolar environment represents both a challenge and an opportunity.

On the one hand, they face a fragmented and competitive landscape marked by shifting alliances, hybrid threats, and mounting pressure from revisionist powers. On the other, their unique combination of military strength, regulatory power, and normative influence positions them to act as pivotal shapers of global security. The question is not whether the EU and NATO remain relevant, but whether they can adapt, innovate, and converge strategically to preserve collective strength in an era of uncertainty.

This text explores the contours of multipolarity, the internal and external pressures that test EU–NATO cohesion, the clash between multilateral and transactional visions of security, and the practical lessons from recent crises such as the war in Ukraine and the rise of cyber and hybrid threats. It argues that the future of transatlantic security depends on moving beyond a narrow division of labor toward a model of strategic convergence that blends deterrence, resilience, and flexible cooperation.

SETTING THE MULTIPOLAR CONTEXT

Multipolarity Defined

The current international system is characterized by multipolarity, where power is no longer dominated by one or two states, but is instead distributed among several key global actors, including the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, and India. This marks a clear departure from the unipolar and bipolar eras of the past.

Characteristics of the Current Era

Today's global order is increasingly complex and competitive, with rivalries extending across political, economic, technological, and military domains. Globalization remains a powerful

driver, fostering deep interdependence while simultaneously fueling strategic rivalries. The security environment is fragmented, marked by fluid alliances and hybrid forms of competition that range from traditional diplomacy to cyberwarfare and coercive tactics.

Implications for Transatlantic Security

Within this context, the European Union seeks to strengthen its role by pursuing strategic autonomy and expanding its defense capabilities. At the same time, NATO continues to serve as the primary pillar of Euro-Atlantic collective defense. However, the unpredictability of today’s multipolar world underscores the urgent need for both the EU and NATO to adapt, enhance cooperation, and effectively address contested global challenges (see Table 1).

Table 1: The EU and NATO in a Multipolar World: A Comparative Overview of Their Roles and Convergence (Source: Own depiction, based on data retrieved from NATO and EU)

Dimension	EU: Strategic Autonomy	NATO: Renewed Threats	EU–NATO: Converging Complexity
Strategic Identity	Civilian power focused on norms, diplomacy, trade	Military alliance based on collective defense (Article 5)	Fragmented identity; mixed priorities among members
Recent Shifts	Geopolitical instability, U.S. recalibration → autonomy push	Crimea (2014), Ukraine (2022) → revitalized deterrence	Fluid alliances, rise of non-state actors, asymmetric threats
Key Instruments	CSDP, PESCO, EDF, Strategic Compass	NATO 2030, joint force structures, cyber/space defense	Joint declarations, technical cooperation, strategic reviews
Internal Challenges	Divergent member views on NATO vs EU independence	Political cohesion, threat perception gaps, burden-sharing	Competing visions, coordination inefficiencies, duplications
Partnerships & Expansion	Selective strategic partnerships; EU Global Gateway	Expanded to Finland, Sweden; Indo-Pacific cooperation	Need for structured EU–NATO dialogue, shared missions
Future Outlook	Focus on innovation, rapid deployment, hybrid defense	Adapting to new domains (cyber, space), reaffirming unity	Reconceptualizing cooperation in multipolar, contested order

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW MULTIPOLAR SECURITY LANDSCAPE

Geopolitical Divergence Within the EU and NATO

A major challenge for transatlantic security stems from diverging threat perceptions among member states. Eastern European countries place a strong emphasis on deterring Russia, while southern members are more concerned with instability in North Africa and the Middle East. Meanwhile, the United States has increasingly shifted its strategic attention toward the Indo-Pacific and the challenge posed by China, creating a growing gap with certain European priorities. Within the EU itself, differences in historical experiences, energy dependence, and political culture further complicate the development of a unified security strategy. This misalignment undermines cooperation and weakens overall strategic coherence.

Ambiguity Over Strategic Autonomy

The European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy adds another layer of complexity. France strongly advocates for a more independent European defense posture, whereas other member states insist that NATO must remain the cornerstone of collective security, wary of potential duplication or division. This ambiguity risks fostering institutional rivalry, strategic confusion, and inefficiencies. Persistent challenges such as burden-sharing and interoperability continue to impede progress, leaving unresolved questions about the EU's future role within the transatlantic security architecture.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW MULTIPOLAR SECURITY LANDSCAPE

External Spoilers Exploiting Divisions

The vulnerabilities within the EU and NATO are further magnified by external actors that deliberately exploit internal divisions. Russia and China employ disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, and energy leverage to deepen political discord and erode trust. Russia's strategy centers on undermining NATO solidarity and fueling polarization within European societies. China, by contrast, often pursues bilateral ties with individual member states in an effort to weaken EU cohesion, particularly on sensitive issues such as human rights and Taiwan. Such interference complicates consensus-building and undermines the capacity for joint action in both organizations.

Internal Fragmentation and Political Fatigue

At the same time, internal dynamics within the EU and NATO present serious obstacles to strategic unity. The rise of populism and nationalism in several member states challenges supranational cooperation and weakens commitment to shared goals. Public skepticism toward foreign interventions and increased defense spending further constrain political leaders. Domestic crises—including inflation, migration pressures, and democratic backsliding—reduce the appetite for ambitious multilateral initiatives. Moreover, frequent leadership changes and election cycles contribute to short-termism, making long-term strategic planning increasingly difficult.

THE CLASH OF MULTILATERALISM VS. TRANSACTIONALISM (WITHIN NATO)

NATO's Post-WWII Multilateralism

Since its founding, NATO has embodied a multilateral approach to security, rooted in the principle of collective defense as enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Beyond military power, its strength has come from shared values, political solidarity, and constant consultation among allies. Trust has been as vital as military capabilities. Contributions have not been measured solely in terms of defense spending but also through deployments, diplomatic initiatives, and participation in joint missions.

Multilateralism as the Core Ethos of the EU and NATO

Both the EU and NATO are anchored in a tradition of multilateralism that emphasizes collective responsibility and long-term strategic planning. This framework allows for flexibility, recognizing that contributions can take diverse forms beyond strict GDP-based benchmarks such as 2% or 5%. Through consensus-based decision-making, both institutions seek to respond effectively to global challenges ranging from Russian aggression to the rise of China and the evolving threats of cyberwarfare and hybrid tactics.

Challenges: The Rise of Transactionalism

In contrast, a more transactional vision of NATO—prominently voiced during the Trump administration—has challenged this ethos. This perspective reduces alliances to direct reciprocity, encapsulated in demands to “pay up or lose protection.” Security commitments are reframed in terms of cost-benefit calculations, with national interests prioritized over collective security. Such an approach risks sidelining institutional norms in favor of bilateral bargaining, thereby weakening the cohesion and long-term stability of the alliance.

Table 2: The Clash of Multilateralism vs. Transactionalism (within NATO)

	Multilateralism	Transactional Approach
Basis	Emphasizing norms and values	Interest (Cost-benefit logic)
Goals	Long-term goals	Short-term gains
Scope	Grand strategy	Issue-specific agreements
International Law	Shaping international norms (Placing great value on international law and unafraid of being bound by international legal norms)	Strengthening of own national position (Doubtful about international law)
Openness	Interdependence (Receptive to international cooperation and optimistic about the growing interdependence, viewing it as crucial to security)	Independence (Efforts to reduce reliance on other international actors and to keep political and economic life as self-sufficient as possible)
Attitude	Solidarity and support	Egoism and holding onto one's interests
Orientation	International-oriented	State-centered
Actors	Multiple actors (It conveys the idea of various stakeholders or participants acting within the framework or system of multilateralism, where multiple parties cooperate and make decisions together)	It can be multilateral, but a bilateral partnership is preferred
Logic	Positive-sum	Zero-sum

Source: Ilik, G. and Adamczyk, A. (2025) "The EU's Compensatory Power Amid Global Transactionalism". *StudiaEuropejskie – Studies in European Affairs*, 1/2025, pp. 155-171. DOI: 10.33067/SE.1.2025.8

CASE STUDIES: TESTING EU–NATO COORDINATION

The War in Ukraine: Complementarity Under Pressure

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 placed the EU–NATO relationship under unprecedented strain while also demonstrating their ability to act in tandem. Although Ukraine is not a member of either organization, both responded swiftly and decisively. NATO activated its defense planning, reinforced its Eastern flank, coordinated arms deliveries and intelligence sharing, and enhanced overall readiness. The EU, for its part, imposed sweeping sanctions, provided large-scale financial and humanitarian aid, extended lethal military support for the first time, and granted Ukraine candidate status. This crisis revealed the strengths of pragmatic cooperation, with each institution leveraging its comparative advantages. Yet limitations remain: the EU lacks a unified military command, while NATO does not have a mandate for sanctions or reconstruction. Nevertheless, the war has driven greater political alignment and closer coordination between the two organizations.

Cybersecurity and Hybrid Threats: Division of Labor in Practice

Cyber and hybrid threats pose another arena where EU–NATO cooperation is tested. These threats blur the lines between civilian and military domains, making deterrence particularly difficult. NATO has recognized cyberspace as an operational domain and hosts the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence to advance allied resilience. The EU complements this by implementing the Cybersecurity Act, deploying the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox, and coordinating through the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA). Current cooperation is largely limited to information sharing, early warning mechanisms, and staff exchanges. However, challenges persist: operational coordination remains weak, protocols are not fully interoperable, and joint exercises are limited. Building a shared strategic culture will be crucial if the EU and NATO are to mount a credible collective response to increasingly complex cyber and hybrid threats.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As the international context fragments and competition intensifies, the EU and NATO stand at a pivotal crossroads. The old “division of labor”—with NATO responsible for military defense and the EU for civilian and economic domains—no longer suffices. In an era of multipolarity, strategic convergence is essential: a unified vision, coordinated action, and mutual reinforcement across the entire security spectrum.

From Division of Labor to Strategic Convergence

Military and non-military threats are now deeply interconnected, ranging from cyberattacks and energy coercion to hybrid warfare that blends conventional and unconventional tools. Addressing these challenges requires the EU and NATO to transcend siloed roles and move toward integrated strategies that combine deterrence, resilience, and normative influence. This does not entail merging institutions but instead fostering a shared outlook through coordinated

planning, joint threat assessments, and capability mapping. The central objective is to avoid duplication, close existing gaps, and ensure strategic alignment—particularly in moments of crisis when speed and coherence matter most.

Flexible and Modular Cooperation Models

Rigid, all-encompassing institutional frameworks can limit responsiveness in a rapidly shifting multipolar environment. Future EU–NATO cooperation will benefit from flexible and modular models, enabling issue-based coalitions of willing and capable actors to address specific challenges such as disinformation, maritime security, or space governance. These coalitions would operate within broader strategic frameworks while allowing agility and partial participation, ensuring that momentum is not stalled by the need for unanimity. Importantly, such models also create space for cooperation with key non-EU and non-NATO partners, particularly in regions like the Indo-Pacific and the Arctic, where Euro-Atlantic security interests are increasingly at stake.

Building Joint Resilience Across Critical Domains

Resilience must be elevated to a core strategic objective, not confined to managing acute crises but embedded in long-term security planning. This requires strengthening societal, infrastructural, and institutional robustness across key domains such as cybersecurity, space assets, energy grids, public health systems, and information ecosystems—all of which remain highly vulnerable to hostile exploitation. The EU’s regulatory power and financial instruments complement NATO’s defense capabilities and operational expertise, creating natural synergies. To effectively preempt hybrid threats, the two organizations should prioritize joint risk assessments, interoperable early-warning systems, and combined exercises that build habits of cooperation and readiness.

Aligning Grand Strategies Amid Diversity

Achieving true strategic convergence also demands a shared geopolitical vision that aligns values, long-term objectives, and threat perceptions among the United States, Canada, and European allies. Yet such convergence must be pursued with sensitivity to the diversity of historical experiences, geopolitical perspectives, and domestic political contexts within both NATO and the EU. Cohesion cannot be built on forced uniformity but on inclusive dialogue, pragmatic compromise, and recognition of legitimate differences. Striking the right balance between unity and diversity is essential to maintaining collective strength in the face of increasingly complex and multidimensional external challenges.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The shifting multipolar security environment presents both profound challenges and unique opportunities for Euro-Atlantic actors. To navigate this complexity, the European Union and NATO

must transcend their traditional roles as defenders of the Western order and instead become adaptive, agile, and forward-looking strategic partners.

Their cooperation is no longer merely functional—it is a strategic imperative, vital for sustaining the West’s relevance, resilience, and influence amid the rise of new powers and the fragmentation of alliances. The future of global security will hinge on their ability to integrate hard military capabilities with normative leadership and comprehensive resilience across multiple domains.

The success of EU–NATO collaboration will rest on three interconnected pillars:

- **Unity of Purpose:** forging a shared vision that brings together diverse political and strategic perspectives into a coherent Euro-Atlantic agenda.
- **Shared Threat Perception:** building consensus on the scope and priorities of both current and emerging security challenges.
- **Institutional Innovation:** reforming structures, doctrines, and operational practices to enable strategic convergence, flexible partnerships, and proactive crisis management.

In a world defined by multipolarity, interdependence, and intensified competition, the effectiveness of EU–NATO cooperation will not only determine their own security futures but also shape the contours of the international order. Strengthening this partnership is not optional—it is essential.

The issue of European security is always viewed through the lens of the rule of law and the development level of democratic society. Western European countries have for decades built open societies with strong democratic institutional capacities and with the approach of “citizens at the center of attention.” Europe’s economic stability, development, global influence, and many other quality-of-life indicators are closely linked to adherence to high standards of human rights and freedoms, and to democratic values which drive positive changes.

Of course, the EU member states from the former Eastern bloc have also made progress over the past three decades, establishing societies capable of developing security, the economy, and technological advancement, while simultaneously promoting the values of the rule of law and democratic capacities. The greater challenges on the European continent persist in the candidate and aspirant countries for EU membership, which are still struggling to establish a sustainable system of values through which the rule of law and objective, responsible governance can be ensured. Regardless of the degree of alignment with European policies or the level of promotion of human rights and freedoms, all countries in Europe face a historic responsibility to prevent a new, wide-scale war on the continent. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to strengthen democratic capacities within states, develop objective security and defense strategies, adopt as unified an approach as possible to respond to threats and risks, and so on.

Currently, the EU's defence framework is primarily intergovernmental, with national governments maintaining control over their security and military forces. While initiatives like the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) aim to enhance coordination, they stop short of establishing a unified EU military and security forces. Legal constraints, such as Articles of the Treaty on European Union, affirm that national security remains the sole responsibility of each member state.

While the EU is taking steps toward greater strategic autonomy, the retention of sovereign control by member states over their armed forces means that the EU cannot yet be considered an independent military and security power on a global scale. Achieving such status would require substantial legal, political, and operational changes, including potential treaty amendments and deeper integration of national defence policies.

A question arises that no one has yet considered: can the EU be viewed as an independent security power on a global level, while each of its member states ultimately retains sovereign authority over the development and deployment of its armed and security forces?

It's not that the leading national politicians of the West—and more broadly, have always seamlessly agreed on their political perspectives; but they have always shared a common understanding of their belonging to the "West" under U.S. leadership. This political significance has disintegrated with the recent rise to power of Donald Trump and as a result of systemic changes in the U.S., even if formally the fate of NATO remains an open question for now.

Public opinion across EU member states reflects support for a more unified and autonomous foreign and security policy, with many Europeans favoring the creation of an EU army and less dependence on the U.S. for military protection.

However, achieving full strategic autonomy remains a complex challenge. The EU's defense competencies are still largely intergovernmental, requiring consensus among member states, each retaining sovereignty over their armed forces. While steps like the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Capacity are underway, the EU continues to rely on NATO and U.S. support for broader security guarantees.

In my opinion, the prevailing sentiment among us—fueled by the unilateral formation of political opinion—is drawn into the vortex of mutual hostility towards the aggressor. Long-term planned rearmament serves another purpose, primarily: EU member states must strengthen and unify their military forces; otherwise, they will no longer be politically respected in a geopolitically unstable and fragmented world. Only as an independent, politically capable union can European countries effectively impose their collective global economic weight, also on behalf of their normative beliefs and interests.

As the EU navigates these complexities, the balance between enhancing collective defense capabilities and respecting member states' sovereignty will be crucial in shaping the future of European security.

The rule of law is integral to European security, serving as a foundational element for both internal stability and the EU's external resilience. Here's how the two are interconnected:

1. Deterrence Against Authoritarian Influence

A robust rule of law framework ensures that all public powers operate within legal constraints, safeguarding democratic values and fundamental rights. This legal integrity acts as a bulwark against authoritarian influences and external threats. For instance, UK Attorney General Richard Hermer emphasized that a selective approach to international law could embolden adversaries like Vladimir Putin, undermining national and regional security.

2. Combating Corruption and Organized Crime

Effective rule of law mechanisms are essential in the fight against corruption and organized crime, which are significant threats to European security. The European Commission highlights that the rule of law is fundamental for cooperation and helps enhance the EU's global competitiveness, economic growth, and social well-being. Weak legal systems can be exploited by criminal networks, leading to increased instability.

3. Ensuring Judicial Independence and Accountability

The rule of law guarantees that all public powers act within the constraints set out by law, under the control of independent and impartial courts. This framework ensures that governments are held accountable, preventing the arbitrary use of power and protecting citizens' rights. Such accountability is crucial for maintaining public trust and preventing internal conflicts that can escalate into broader security issues.

4. Strengthening EU Cohesion and Mutual Trust

The rule of law is a founding value of the EU and is essential for its functioning. It ensures the uniform application of EU law across all Member States, creating a predictable environment for people and businesses. This uniformity fosters mutual trust among Member States, which is vital for collective security and cooperation

5. Promoting Stability in Candidate Countries

For countries aspiring to join the EU, adherence to the rule of law is a key criterion. The EU's enlargement policy emphasizes the importance of the rule of law in establishing a society based on justice and fundamental rights. By promoting legal reforms and strengthening institutions in candidate countries, the EU contributes to regional stability and security

The rule of law stands as both a significant challenge and a pivotal opportunity for EU candidate countries, particularly those in the Western Balkans. Adherence to the rule of law is a fundamental requirement for EU accession, as outlined in the Copenhagen criteria and emphasized in negotiation Chapters 23 and 24, which focus on judiciary reform, fundamental rights, justice, freedom, and security. The rule of law is a fundamental principle that ensures justice, stability, and prosperity within societies. Its importance can be understood through several key aspects:

1. Protection of Rights and Liberties
2. Economic Development
3. Social Order and Stability
4. Trust in Government
5. Prevention of Corruption

The state of the rule of law in North Macedonia, as in all EU candidate countries, is far from ideal. Even many EU member states cannot boast a high level of rule of law, but their systems are slightly more functional than those in candidate countries. This observation aligns with recent assessments. For instance, the 2024 EU Rule of Law Report highlights that North Macedonia has undergone several waves of judicial reforms, yet the independence of the judiciary and its protection from undue influence remain serious concerns. The perceived level of judicial independence is very low, and appointment decisions of prosecutors and judges have been criticized for lacking comprehensive justification or objective criteria. Moreover, while some EU member states face challenges regarding the rule of law, their systems are generally more functional compared to those in candidate countries. The European Commission's 2024 Rule of Law Reports note that, although issues persist in member states, the overall efficiency and independence of their judicial systems tend to be more robust than in candidate countries.

Challenges in Upholding the Rule of Law

- Insufficient political will to implement judicial reforms, which hampers progress in the rule of law.

- Weaknesses in the judicial system, particularly regarding transparency, independence, efficiency, and accountability of the Judicial Council.
- Amendments to the Criminal Code from 2023 have weakened the legal framework and made it more difficult to prosecute cases of high-level corruption and organized crime.
- Lack of true separation of powers and low public trust in institutions and their ability to deliver justice.
- Corruption as a complex phenomenon that undermines the rule of law and threatens democracy and security.
- The need for enhanced institutional responsibility and accountability, especially concerning external influences on the judiciary.

The importance of a functional and independent judiciary as a fundamental pillar for the rule of law and the protection of human rights.

Some of the challenges and presents opportunities:

- **Strengthening Institutions:** Implementing reforms can lead to more robust, transparent, and accountable institutions.
- **Enhancing Public Trust:** Effective anti-corruption measures and judicial reforms can rebuild citizens' confidence in the legal system.
- **Aligning with EU Standards:** Progress in rule of law reforms brings candidate countries closer to EU membership, fostering economic growth and stability.

While the path to EU accession is fraught with challenges regarding the rule of law, these very challenges offer a roadmap for transformative reforms. By committing to these changes, candidate countries not only fulfill EU requirements but also lay the foundation for stronger democracies and societies.

Today, I'd like to reflect on a truth we cannot afford to ignore: without the rule of law, there can be no lasting security. For EU candidate countries, this is not merely a legal requirement for accession—it is the bedrock upon which democratic resilience, public trust, and national stability are built.

My remarks today focus on three interconnected pillars:

1. The Rule of Law as the Cornerstone of Democratic Security
2. Judicial Independence as its Most Vital Pillar
3. How Corruption Undermines Security from Within

1. The Rule of Law as the Cornerstone of Democratic Security

What do we mean by "security"? Too often, we limit it to borders, armies, or counter-terrorism. But in today's complex world, insecurity also comes from within—from weakened institutions, corruption, and broken public trust.

True security is democratic security: the assurance that institutions protect rights, resolve conflicts fairly, and uphold the social contract.

The rule of law delivers this. It means:

- Laws apply equally to all, including the powerful.
- Institutions are accountable, transparent, and predictable.
- Citizens can access justice and trust the system to protect them.

On the contrary, as John Locke—who laid the groundwork for the rule of law and the separation of powers—observed, quote “Where law ends, tyranny begins unquote. When the rule of law weakens, instability follows. We see eroded public confidence, increased polarization, and vulnerability to hybrid threats. Without the rule of law, the doors open to a range of security threats. Corruption compromises border controls. Executive overreach invites authoritarianism. And weakened courts allow hybrid actors to exploit vulnerabilities from within. For candidate countries, this isn't abstract—it's the difference between resilience and fragility. The EU understands this. Chapter 23 of the acquis isn't a bureaucratic hurdle—it is the foundation for a secure, integrated future.

But, the rule of law isn't a destination it is a journey. Even some EU member states are facing challenges regarding rule of law, according to Annual Rule of law report 2024 of the EU Commission.

2. Judicial Independence: A Core Security Concern

Judicial independence is not a luxury for mature democracies—it is a precondition for peace, investment, and trust in governance. It is also one of the most reliable defenses against state capture and authoritarian drift.

In EU candidate countries, this independence remains formally guaranteed—but functionally vulnerable. Institutions may exist, but they often lack autonomy, protection from interference, or basic resources.

Take the case of North Macedonia, as one example among many. According to recent Annual progress report of EU, the country has made some progress: a new judicial reform strategy was adopted, and peer review recommendations were acknowledged. But serious concerns remain. The announced intention to ‘dissolve’ judicial councils signals executive overreach. Meanwhile, chronic shortages in personnel and inadequate budget allocations continue to undermine the judiciary’s effectiveness. Too often, reforms appear cyclical—not truly systemic.

And this is not just a Macedonian story—it’s a regional pattern, where reform rhetoric masks entrenched political interference.

Let me illustrate this with a metaphor—a striking image offered by a colleague describing the judiciary’s reality:

"Our judiciary is like an infant locked in a windowless room. Chain-smokers stride in and out, poisoning the air, then demand to know why the child is sick. In the name of ‘care’, they feed it pills—never opening a window. And when frustration builds? They consider smothering the child to start anew."

The chain-smokers are political actors and executive powers—interfering in judicial appointments, slashing budgets, and pressuring independent judges. The pills are superficial reforms—laws passed to please Brussels while the air remains toxic. And the child—the judiciary—is suffocating, unable to recover, and blamed for its own weakness.

An independent judiciary is not just a safeguard for rights—it is a firewall against democratic backsliding, organized crime, and foreign interference. Where courts lack credibility or autonomy, these threats grow unchecked.

3. Corruption: Undermining Security from Within

No conversation about the rule of law is complete without confronting its greatest internal threat: corruption.

Corruption erodes public trust, deters investment, and corrodes institutions from within. It undermines the very security that EU membership is meant to safeguard.

Here too, we see troubling trends. In North Macedonia, despite a functioning anti-corruption framework, recent amendments to the Criminal Code, adopted by parliament weakened the legal foundation for prosecuting high-level corruption. Cases collapsed. Statutes of limitation expired. Key offences—like abuse of office—were quietly removed just as investigations began to bite.

This sends a dangerous signal: that power can protect itself, and that the law can be reshaped to serve those who fear it.

But corruption doesn’t just exist in politics—it can also penetrate the judiciary itself. **When judges are compromised, justice becomes selective.** That’s why promoting judicial integrity is

not optional—it's essential. Clear codes of ethics, transparent appointments, performance-based evaluations, and swift disciplinary procedures must be the norm.

A judiciary that cleans its own house is a judiciary that can truly protect the rule of law.

Progress Reports: Roadmaps, Not Formalities

The European Commission's progress reports are not just technical assessments—they are roadmaps for transformation. They show where countries stand, but more importantly, where they must go.

These reports make clear: partial reform is not enough. Judicial independence must be real, not just written. Anti-corruption bodies must be resourced, empowered, and respected. Civil society must be included—not sidelined.

The Role of Civil Society and Media

An independent judiciary cannot function in isolation. It needs watchdogs—civil society, investigative journalists, and a free media—to help ensure transparency and accountability. When civil society or media expose abuse, they do not weaken the system—they protect it. Supporting them is not only about democracy—it is about institutional resilience.

The Way Forward: Integration as a Security Strategy

So, what must we do?

1. **Candidate countries must treat judicial reform and anti-corruption not as EU demands, but as sovereign investments in national security.**
2. **The EU must use the accession process strategically—rewarding tangible progress, such as convictions in corruption cases and court rulings that uphold independence, not just new laws on paper.**
3. **Civil society and media must be safeguarded. They are early-warning systems—our best defense against democratic backsliding.**

Security without the rule of law is an illusion. For candidate countries, embracing this triad—**Rule of Law, Judicial Independence, and Anti-Corruption**—isn't about pleasing Brussels. It's about building nations resilient to both internal decay and external threats.

Conclusion: Clearing the Air

Let us return to the child in the room.

We cannot expect recovery while the air remains toxic. We cannot ask why reforms fail while ignoring who—and what—is poisoning the system.

Clearing the air—ending political interference, ensuring accountability, and empowering independent institutions—is not just a technical condition for EU accession. It is the moral and political foundation of a secure society.

For EU candidate countries, the rule of law is not an external demand—it is an internal necessity. Let us commit, collectively and concretely, to building justice systems that can breathe freely—and in doing so, lay the foundation for peace, prosperity, and European unity.

Thank you.

What is the Rule of Law?

When we talk about the rule of law, I think it means a lot of different things to different people. Philosophers and legal experts have debated about what exactly we mean by rule of law. So – to begin, what does it **mean** for a State to be one **based** on the Rule of Law?

Sometimes, the easiest way to define **what something is** to start with **what something is not**.

The Rule of Law is the antithesis of the Rule of Man – that is, the **arbitrary rule** of a **person or group**, whatever their ideology.

In a State where the rule of law is upheld, **everyone** is subject to the same law.

- No-one is **above** the law.
- All are **equal** before the law.
- No single person – even a Head of Government or State – can simply **change** the law.
- No single group – not a government with a large majority – can **act outside** of the law.
- And no single ideology – can **impose itself** upon the State.
- The law serves not as an **enabler of** – but as a **constraint on** – **arbitrary** power.

THE MEANING AND ACCEPTANCE OF RULES

Why do we follow rules in the first place? It starts when we are kids and our parents teach us the difference between right and wrong behaviour. On the one hand, there are prohibitions and their corresponding regulations, while on the other hand, there is adherence to commandments and desired conduct, including rewards. A healthy constitutional state and legal system create space for the individual and his or her cultural development, much like a child is given unfettered space. Several factors are necessary for the functioning of the rule of law, but three categories are particularly significant.

First: rules function and are observed if we can identify ourselves in the law that is set and it is clear to us that these rules make sense.

Second: if rules are not respected, sanctions must be imposed.

Thirdly: the rules must apply equally to everyone.

Wherever corruption or totalitarian forms of government prevail, the gap between law and justice is obvious. Personal power is then given higher priority than a functioning legislature, judiciary and executive.

In corrupt systems, money and power have a higher value than the rule of law. Corruption is the enemy of the rule of law and democracy and returns us to a chaotic environment where

blood feuds were the guiding principle of human society. People can only live together in an orderly manner if it is clear to everyone which 'rules' are being played by – and if all people abide by these sensible and sanctioned rules. These are the principles that we all as citizens of Macedonia must abide by.

A HEALTHY CONSTITUTIONAL STATE ENSURES DIGNITY AND PEACE

In the book "Crime and Guilt" by the one of Germany's most prominent defense attorneys, Ferdinand von Schirach, the protagonist says: 'A person's guilt is hard to weigh. We strive for happiness all our lives. But sometimes we lose ourselves and things go wrong. Then only the law separates us from chaos. A thin layer of ice, underneath which it is cold and you die quickly.'

This sentence describes the role of law. That fine line between a stable life of peace and harmony on the one hand and chaos on the other. This quote emphasises the significance of a stable wall of a functioning rule of law for the dignity of every individual and the susceptibility of humans to conflict and disturbances that can derail us. Throughout a variety of laws and conventions, the concept of dignity is emphasised: "Human dignity is inviolable." It is the responsibility of all state authorities to uphold and safeguard it.

The correspondence between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud from 1932 is about the understanding and meaning of law in the sense of a peace phenomenon. In it, Freud says: 'Law is the power of a community.' Freud sees law as an essential building block in the cultural development of humanity.

Only law gave people the possibility to rely on a stable external structure. The handling of conflicts entered a new civilised phase when the blood vengeance of humans was replaced by the introduction of the court. The peaceful management of conflicts was henceforth an achievement in which humanity could rely on jurisprudence as a foundation. A wall of security that represents an important step on the way to the self-determined individual. The guardian of this collective stability is the rule of law with its separation of powers between the jurisdiction, the independent judiciary, the executive bodies, i.e. the government and its powers, and the legislature, i.e. the parliament.

THE RULE OF LAW AS A SECURE FRAMEWORK FOR ALL CITIZENS

The rule of law is a foundational principle of democratic governance and a cornerstone of national security. It establishes the foundation for the upholding of public trust in institutions, the guarantee of government accountability, and the protection of civil liberties. In an era in which foreign threats to our national security appear to be more potent than ever, how can we guarantee that the rule of law and support for our democracy are not undermined by either internal or external attacks on these principles?

To safeguard both national security and democratic principles in the face of foreign threats, a multifaceted approach is needed. This includes strengthening domestic institutions, promoting open government, and fostering international cooperation.

In 1998 Thomas Carothers argued in a provocative *Foreign Affairs* article, 'one cannot get through a foreign policy debate these days without someone proposing the rule of law as a solution to the world's troubles.' Indeed, RoL has been invoked repeatedly in a range of contexts, to the point that some have considered it a catch-all phrase without precise conceptual or practical delineations.

The rule of law and security are deeply intertwined, each reinforcing the other. The rule of law provides a framework for predictable and stable interactions, promoting peace and security, while security sector reform and strong rule of law institutions are crucial for maintaining stability and restoring trust, according to the United Nations.

Rule of Law as a Foundation for Security:

The rule of law ensures that everyone is subject to the law, regardless of their position or power. This creates a predictable and stable environment where individuals and businesses can thrive, reducing the likelihood of conflict and promoting social cohesion.

Security Sector Reform and Rule of Law:

Strong and accountable law enforcement, justice, and correctional institutions, including those that respect human rights, are essential for maintaining security and restoring trust after conflict. These institutions play a vital role in upholding the rule of law and ensuring that perpetrators of crimes are held accountable.

Mutual Reinforcement:

The rule of law and security are mutually reinforcing. Strong security institutions help enforce the rule of law, while the rule of law provides a framework for the legitimate use of power by security forces.

International Dimensions:

The rule of law is also crucial in international security, as it provides a framework for countries to interact with each other in a predictable and stable manner, promoting peace and cooperation.

Challenges:

Despite the strong link between the rule of law and security, there are challenges to both. In some cases, security concerns can be used to justify the erosion of the rule of law, while a lack of effective rule of law institutions can undermine security efforts.

Importance of a Holistic Approach:

A comprehensive approach to enhancing the rule of law and security is essential, including addressing the root causes of conflict, promoting human rights, and supporting nationally owned efforts to reform the security sector.

Security and Human Rights:

According, to the World Justice Project, It is crucial to ensure that security measures do not undermine human rights or the rule of law. A balanced approach is needed that prioritizes both security and the protection of fundamental rights.

The beneficiaries of the rule of law are we, the citizens. The law creates the balance between violence, aggression, and joie de vivre and with that contributes significantly to society's ability to change and develop despite enormous disruptions.

The rule of law, which ensures laws are applied fairly and equally, is crucial for long-term security because it provides a framework for stability, accountability, and dispute resolution, ultimately fostering a more secure and peaceful society. By limiting the abuse of power, upholding property rights, and providing access to justice, the rule of law builds trust in government and the legal system, reducing the potential for conflict and violence.

Here's a more detailed look at how the rule of law contributes to long-term security:

- **Limiting State Power:**

The rule of law prevents arbitrary actions by the government, ensuring that even those in power are held accountable under the law, which reduces the risk of tyranny and abuse of power.

- **Upholding Rights and Freedoms:**

By protecting fundamental rights and freedoms, the rule of law creates a society where individuals are empowered and less likely to resort to violence or extremism as a means of redress.

- **Fair and Impartial Justice:**

The rule of law provides a fair and accessible justice system where disputes can be resolved peacefully, reducing the likelihood of resorting to violence and creating a more stable society.

- **Building Trust and Social Cohesion:**

A strong rule of law system fosters trust between citizens and the state, promoting social cohesion and a sense of shared responsibility for maintaining peace and security.

- **Economic Development and Stability:**

The rule of law supports a stable and predictable environment for businesses, which is essential for economic growth and development, which can reduce poverty and inequality, further contributing to security.

- **Preventing and Addressing Conflicts:**

The rule of law can play a vital role in preventing and addressing conflicts by providing mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution, and by upholding human rights and addressing grievances.

- **International Cooperation and Security:**

The rule of law is also essential for international cooperation and security, as it provides a framework for international relations and the enforcement of international law.

In Macedonia, strengthening the rule of law is crucial for both domestic security and the country's path toward EU integration. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement, which underpins the EU-Macedonia relationship, emphasizes the importance of shared values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. A robust rule of law framework is essential for a secure and stable society, while also being a key requirement for EU accession.

- **Rule of Law as a Foundation for Security:**

A strong rule of law ensures that all citizens are treated equally under the law, that government power is limited, and that human and civil rights are protected. This creates a foundation for a stable and predictable society, which is essential for effective law enforcement and security measures.

- **EU Integration and the Rule of Law:**

The EU places a high priority on the rule of law in its candidate countries. Macedonia's progress in strengthening its legal system, including reforms to the judiciary and the criminal justice system, is a key factor in its EU accession process.

- **EU Support for Rule of Law:**

The EU has been providing significant support to Macedonia in its efforts to strengthen the rule of law. This support includes technical assistance, financial aid, and policy guidance aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and anti-corruption bodies.

- **Challenges to the Rule of Law:**

Despite the progress made, challenges remain in strengthening the rule of law in Macedonia. These include limited financial resources for the judiciary, concerns about the autonomy of the courts, and the need for further reforms to improve the effectiveness of the legal system.

- **Impact on Security:**

A weak rule of law can undermine security by enabling corruption, facilitating organized crime, and eroding public trust in the legal system. Conversely, a strong rule of law can help to prevent these threats and create a safer and more secure environment for all citizens.

Political will is essential for implementing security changes, but so is a strong and well-integrated administrative capacity of law enforcement agencies and other competent authorities that must meet the requisite criteria.⁵⁸ Many worldwide publications reveal our country's achievements and flaws in order to raise standards in this field. However, reference documents, according to which negotiations will take place, including in this chapter, are the "Rule of Law Roadmap," which should address the identified shortcomings in the Report on the conducted screening of the Republic of North Macedonia in relation to Cluster 1, and the EC Progress Report on the Republic of North Macedonia. According to the legal experts, "roadmaps should not reflect the ideal conditions to which we strive and demonstrate the intellectual skills of the creators but should be a realistic reflection of what should and can be done given the existing capacities." Delivering what is specified in the roadmaps is imperative during the negotiation process.

- **EU's Role:**

The EU plays a crucial role in promoting and protecting the rule of law in Macedonia. The EU's conditionality approach to accession negotiations provides incentives for Macedonia to implement reforms and strengthen its legal system.

Weakening the rule of law in response to security challenges can lead to a dangerous spiral of consequences, including eroding trust in institutions, fostering impunity, and potentially undermining democratic values. This can ultimately create a more insecure society, even as security measures are increased.

Elaboration:

- **Erosion of Trust:**

When the rule of law is compromised, even temporarily, people lose faith in the legal system and government's ability to provide justice and protect their rights. This can lead to a decline in social cohesion and increased distrust in institutions, making it harder to address long-term security issues.

- **Rise of Impunity:**

When the rule of law is weakened, those who violate laws and norms may be less likely to face consequences. This creates an environment where impunity can flourish, emboldening those who engage in harmful behavior, including criminals and those involved in state-sponsored abuses.

- **Undermining Democratic Values:**

Weakening the rule of law can erode democratic values such as accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights. This can create a more authoritarian climate, where citizens' rights are less protected, and the potential for abuses of power increases.

- **Increased Insecurity:**

Paradoxically, weakening the rule of law can lead to a more insecure society in the long run. While temporary measures may be implemented to address immediate threats, the erosion of trust, impunity, and democratic values can create an environment where long-term security challenges are more difficult to address effectively.

- **Economic and Social Costs:**

A weakened rule of law can also have significant economic and social costs. It can deter investment, discourage trade, and hinder economic development. It can also lead to increased social unrest and violence, further undermining the overall security situation.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION ON TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS -2024

The survey results show significant differences in the level of trust in key social sectors. The highest level of full or partial trust was expressed by citizens in banks and financial institutions (59.2%), while the lowest level of trust was observed in the government (27.1%) and political parties (27.6%).

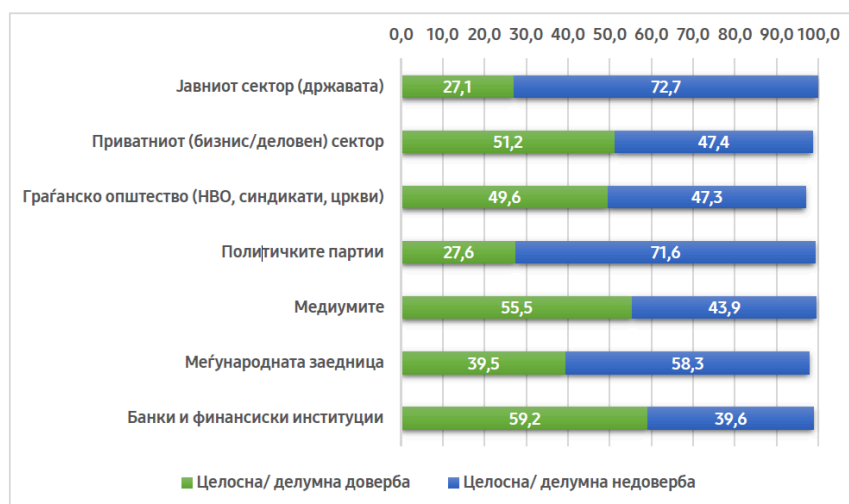


Chart 1: Trust in key social sectors (%) – 2024

Source: Macedonian Center for International Cooperation

The analysis of trust in institutions shows significant differences in the perception of citizens (Chart 2). The army is the institution with the highest level of trust (67.8%), followed by utilities and other public enterprises (58.2%), educational institutions (57.8%), and healthcare institutions (54.1%). The police forces also enjoy a relatively high level of trust (50.0%), which indicates a stable perception of their work. On the other hand, the judicial system is facing the greatest crisis of trust. The courts and the public prosecution office record the lowest levels of trust, with 14.4% and 16.9%, respectively. The Government and the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, as key state bodies, also have a low level of trust – 26.0% and 24.5%. The State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, with 22.6%, is among the institutions that enjoy a lower level of trust among citizens. The index of trust in state institutions records a significant decline.

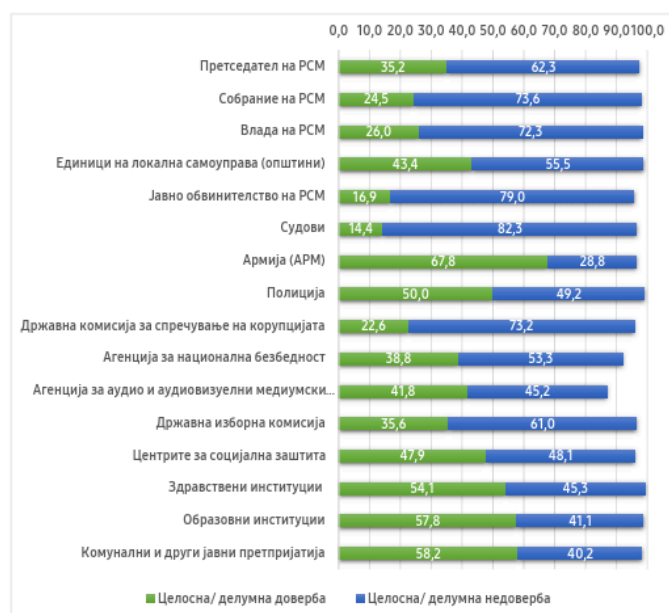


Chart 2. Source: Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, 2024

Trust in the international community Trust in the international community is researched through trust in five international organizations: the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, NATO and the OSCE (Chart No. 6). The results show that trust is similar between these organizations, with minimal differences. Citizens express somewhat greater trust in the United Nations (49.1%) and NATO (48.2%), while they have slightly lower trust in the European Union (46.7%), the OSCE (47.4%) and the Council of Europe (44.4%). The index of trust in international institutions remains stable, with insignificant changes.

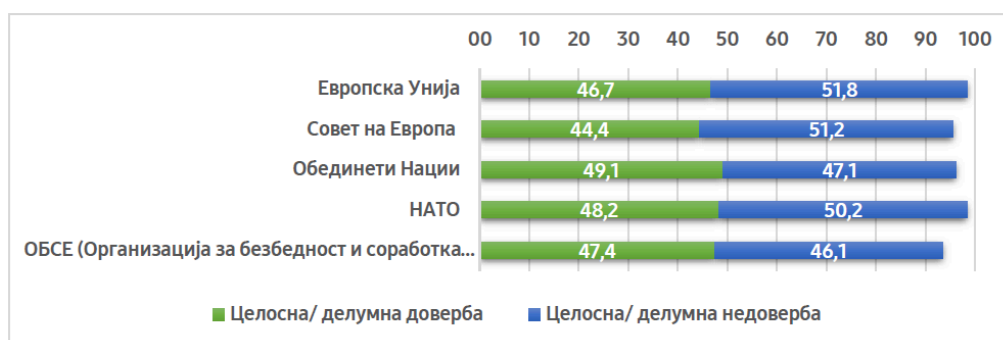


Chart 3: Trust in the international community

Source: Macedonian Center for International Cooperation- 2024

Upholding the rule of law is crucial for the EU: citizens and companies thrive in an environment where no one is above the law, including lawmakers and leaders. Impartial justice is essential for the functioning of the EU single market; transparency and accountability promote trust and political cohesion among member-states.

The rule of law in Europe, a cornerstone of the European Union (EU), signifies that everyone, including government officials and institutions, is subject to the law and accountable for their actions. It encompasses principles like legality, legal certainty, impartial courts, separation of powers, and equality before the law. This framework is essential for the EU's functioning, particularly its single market, and fosters trust and cohesion among member states.

Core Principles of the Rule of Law in Europe:

- **Legality:** Laws must be enacted through a transparent, accountable, democratic, and pluralistic process.
- **Legal Certainty:** People and businesses can rely on the predictable application of laws.
- **Impartial Justice:** Effective judicial protection is provided by independent and impartial courts, including access to justice.
- **Separation of Powers:** Powers are divided among legislative, executive, and judicial branches.
- **Equality Before the Law:** Everyone is treated equally under the law, without discrimination.

- **Accountability:** Those in power, including government officials, are accountable for their actions and subject to legal scrutiny.

Macedonia's journey towards joining the European Union.

The rule of law is a moral imperative for all societies. At the core of the rule of law is that any exercise of power should be subject to the law: —the rule of law, not men.

According to Koen Lenaerts, President of the European Union's Court of Justice, the rule of law has become part of the EU's —raison d'être or European DNA (Reynders 2023, 1). The European Union is founded on shared principles of democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. This has been enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, which lists —respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Before joining the EU, all new Member States must adhere to the EU's fundamental values, as determined by the so-called —Copenhagen criteria. Thus, the fundamental Treaty provision governing EU expansion, Article 49(1) TEU, states that —any European State that respects the values referred to in Article 2 [TEU] and is —committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union.

The EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans is the epitome of an imperfect and highly politicized enlargement process. Macedonia's path to membership in the European Union is a complex rapprochement process that has evolved into a frustrating obstacle course that resembles an odyssey and continues to be a never-ending agony.

The Macedonian name saga lasted over three decades before being settled under significant international pressure, if not actual EU and US intervention. The story of the name dispute settlement is not one in which the EU should be particularly proud. It is the story of politics triumphing over the rule of law during the enlargement process, as well as the depreciation of EU values. The “historic” agreement between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Macedonia just opened the Pandora's box for Macedonia's EU accession process, and that Prespa was just an illusion, which was shown with France's veto in 2019 and, after that, the famous so-called French proposal.

Karl Marx said that —history repeats itself, first as a tragedy, second as a farce (Bhaskar 2023). In the Macedonian case, this is true, and this time with the so-called —French proposal and the annual reports on the implementation of the agreement and protocols with Bulgaria, which are now part of the Negotiating Framework for the accession to the EU.

And we would not be in this vicious circle if the former authorities had rejected the French proposal. The bad proposal should have been rejected, and then a political consensus should have been reached, and a diplomatic offensive should have been jointly launched that would have explained why the French proposal was unacceptable to us. In three or four months, maybe even sooner, a new proposal would have come, and we would probably now be opening and closing

negotiation chapters instead of wasting energy on unnecessary blockades imposed precisely because of the previous blind obedience to Brussels and everything that came from there.

Macedonia has set EU membership as its strategic goal, and it will move in that direction, but under conditions that apply to everyone. When we, show character as a country, then everyone will appreciate us more.

Respect for legal norms and standards and the return of international law to the pedestal of societal values must be imperative for humanity today. Otherwise, the only norm by which the world will be governed will be force, which introduces chaos and anarchy.

Nevertheless, it is essential that the EU, especially in times of uncertainty and in the current geopolitical context that the EU and the whole world are facing, rethinks and revitalizes its enlargement policies. The negotiation framework should consistently prioritize merit-based criteria, particularly those under the Cluster —Fundamentals, while avoiding conflicts arising from bilateral issues that could imperil them.

Macedonia should prioritize strengthening its rule of law, ensuring the independence of the judiciary, and improving the quality of laws. This includes focusing on transparent and accountable decision-making, accessible and impartial justice, and upholding fundamental rights.

As professors, prosecutors, lawyers, government officials, and citizens of today, we all understand why it is important to uphold, defend, and promote the rule of law in Macedonia! That's why, today, I invite you to be **active** and **engaged** citizens, to never underestimate how important it is for **each and every one** of us to **uphold, defend, and promote** the rule of law.

Russia's Return as a Strategic Adversary: Hybrid Warfare, Civilizational Narratives, and the Western Balkans in the New Security Order

Understanding Russia's 'modus operandi' is essential to shaping a coherent Western response. Moscow's strategy is rooted in a civilizational worldview, geopolitical grievance, and hybrid confrontation. To respond effectively, we must grasp how Russia conceptualizes power, identity, and order in the international system.

1. Civilizational doctrines and strategic worldviews in Russian foreign policy

Russia's resurgence as a strategic adversary is grounded not only in classical geopolitics but also in a civilizational vision that reimagines its global role. Drawing on a Darwinian and Hobbesian worldview, the Kremlin rejects the liberal premise of international cooperation through rules and institutions. Instead, it sees the international system as anarchic, competitive, and structured by spheres of influence. This framing is reinforced by ideological narratives promoted by figures such as Alexander Dugin and Sergei Karaganov.

Dugin's *Eurasianism* posits Russia as the core of a distinct civilization that stands in opposition to the West. According to this vision, Russia is not just a state but a spiritual and cultural entity tasked with uniting the Orthodox Slavic world and resisting Western liberalism and globalism. Karaganov, in turn, articulates the idea of a "global majority" a bloc of non-Western nations positioned to challenge Western dominance, de-westernize the world and reassert cultural sovereignty. These narratives transform geopolitics into a civilizational struggle, positioning Russia not only as a military power but as a normative alternative to the liberal international order. Within this discourse on multipolarity and competing poles, China also positions itself as a distinct civilizational power.

This worldview frames Western liberalism as decadent and morally bankrupt, while Russia is portrayed as the defender of tradition, sovereignty, and identity. It underpins Moscow's revanchist foreign policy and justifies expansionist moves, from the annexation of Crimea to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As Stephen Kotkin noted in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, this is not a new phenomenon but a continuation of "Russia's perpetual geopolitics," a strategic culture shaped by insecurity and imperial nostalgia.

2. Hybrid warfare and the weaponization of identity

Contemporary Russian strategy increasingly relies on hybrid warfare, a toolkit that blends conventional force with cyberattacks, disinformation, strategic corruption, and political subversion. This approach, sometimes referred to as the Gerasimov Doctrine, reflects the belief that the line between war and peace is blurred and that information is both a weapon and a domain of constant contestation.

The war in Ukraine exemplifies this doctrine in action. Russia has used energy blackmail, cyberattacks, historical revisionism, and media propaganda to manipulate perceptions and weaken resistance, not only in Ukraine but across Europe. The use of food as a weapon, including the blockade of Ukrainian grain exports, echoes historical atrocities such as the Holodomor, reinforcing Russia's instrumentalization of memory and trauma.

Central to this hybrid strategy is the weaponization of identity. Russia appeals to ethnic, religious, and historical ties particularly among Orthodox Slavic populations, to foster division and loyalty beyond its borders. This is especially evident in the Western Balkans, where Moscow cultivates influence through cultural diplomacy, support for pro-Russian elites, and alliance with segments of the Orthodox Church. These identity-based operations are not merely instruments of soft power; they serve concrete geopolitical objectives, including the obstruction of NATO and EU integration and the disruption of an order founded on values such as transparency, rule of law, human rights, and accountability.

3. The Western Balkans as a vulnerable theater in the new security order

While Ukraine remains the central battlefield in Russia's confrontation with the West, the Western Balkans represent a critical flank. The region's unresolved ethnic disputes, weak institutions, and contested political identities make it a fertile ground for malign influence. Here, Russia's hybrid strategies intersect most visibly and are increasingly reinforced by the presence of China and other authoritarian actors seeking to expand their influence. Moscow's support for Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, its alignment with Serbia's position on Kosovo, and its indirect influence in North Macedonia all reflect a coherent strategy aimed at undermining Euro-Atlantic integration. The 2015 remarks by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, identifying the Balkans as "in the line of fire," remain acutely relevant. Russia seeks to prevent the consolidation of a secure, democratic, and NATO-aligned Southeast Europe by inflaming identity tensions and promoting illiberal alternatives.

Russian disinformation campaigns in the region, including the spread of conspiracy theories and anti-Western sentiment, are tailored to local grievances and historical wounds. They are amplified by media outlets, political actors, and even elements within the Orthodox Church. In North Macedonia, for example, pro-Russian narratives have sought to delegitimize the Prespa Agreement and the Ohrid Framework Agreement, threatening both internal cohesion and external alignment.

In this context, the Western Balkans serve not merely as a geopolitical periphery, but as a test case for the resilience of the European security architecture. The failure to counter Russia's influence here would signal broader vulnerabilities across the Euro-Atlantic space. As such, deeper EU and NATO engagement anchored in rule of law, strategic communication, and hybrid threat preparedness is not only desirable but strategically imperative.

The Future of Euro-Atlantic Security

Introduction

Good morning everyone. We stand at a pivotal moment for Euro-Atlantic security. The Euro-Atlantic security architecture is under strain due to great power rivalry, regional conflicts, and shifting global priorities. The vision of a stable, united Europe is under siege—fractured by war in Ukraine, great power rivalry, and hybrid threats. The dream of a Europe whole, free, and at peace has eroded under the pressures of war, rivalry, and geopolitical fragmentation. The Ukraine conflict symbolizes the collapse of the post-Cold War order and the emergence of Eurasian alternatives. The rules-based international order is increasingly seen as a euphemism for Western exceptionalism. Western liberal values have been weaponized geopolitically—leading to selective sovereignty, regime change, and economic coercion. The opposition has grown and Europe and NATO face a challenge of **adapting** to hard power realities. The resurgence of great power rivalry, particularly between the U.S., Russia, and China, is reshaping Euro-Atlantic security. These challenges offer opportunities to strengthen our security architecture, particularly by integrating regions like the Western Balkans and embracing a more inclusive global order. Let us use this moment not only to take stock of the risks but to seize the opportunities for building a more resilient, inclusive, and realistic security architecture. Let's explore how we can turn challenges into progress taking into consideration Macedonian and Western Balkan realities and needs.

Point 1: Navigating Great Power Rivalry

The Euro-Atlantic security order, anchored by NATO and the EU, long assumed to be stable and self-reinforcing, faces strain from renewed great power competition. NATO's eastward expansion was seen by many in the West as a means to ensure peace. But to others, it symbolized exclusion and encirclement. NATO's eastward expansion, while rooted in sovereignty, has been perceived by Russia as a threat, fueling a zero-sum dynamic. Security dilemma in action: what the West views as deterrence, Russia perceives as encirclement. Russia, feeling threatened, lashed out—unjustifiably, but not unpredictably. This war is the consequence of a failure to build an inclusive security framework after 1991—one that could accommodate the interests of both large and small states. This doesn't justify aggression but highlights a failure to balance interests. Security is not just about norms and values—it is also about interests and perceptions. Moscow's invasion of Ukraine is the consequence of a failure to build an inclusive security framework after 1991—one that could accommodate the interests of both large and small states.

The war in Ukraine reveals the end of unchallenged Western primacy, and the emergence of a more complex, contested global order. The conflict has exposed Europe's vulnerabilities—energy dependence, military underinvestment, and reliance on U.S. support.

Uncertainty over U.S. commitment to NATO, especially post-2024 U.S. elections, raises concerns about the transatlantic link's durability. A U.S. pivot to Asia or reduced support for Ukraine could leave Europe, particularly the Balkans, exposed to Russian influence. Europe must take greater responsibility for its defense to avoid over-reliance on Washington. It can pursue strategic autonomy to complement NATO. Initiatives like the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and Defense Fund can enhance European capabilities. A balanced transatlantic partnership, with Europe taking greater responsibility, is critical for Euro-Atlantic security. The Balkans can contribute by aligning national defense policies with EU/NATO standards.

Point 2: Multipolarity and the Return of Great Power Politics

We now live in a multipolar era. As Marko Rubio, US State Secretary said, the unipolar moment is over. Today, multiple great power centers—China, Russia, the U.S., and the EU—as well as regional players such as, India, Japan, Iran, Israel, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia, compete not just militarily, but also through technology, energy, finance, and value promotion. In a multipolar system, regional balances of power matter more than universal values. Russia, through frameworks like the Eurasian Economic Union, BRICS, and cooperation with China, is crafting an alternative security and economic architecture challenging established narratives and public institutions through hybrid warfare, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns. Euro-Atlantic structures must adapt, not only to deter conventional threats but to build resilience in the face of these diffuse, non-linear dangers. And in this new landscape, a Western-centric model of security is insufficient. The future requires dialogue not only with allies but also with rivals—and with the many states that don't fit neatly into Cold War binaries. Euro-Atlantic security requires a pragmatic, power-based grand strategy, not idealistic visions of perpetual peace. Security is not guaranteed—it is earned through power, resolve, and strategic clarity. The Euro-Atlantic community must embrace the harsh realities of international politics to thrive in the decades ahead.

Point 3: Building an Inclusive, Resilient Security Model

Euro-Atlantic security must evolve beyond a Western-centric model to address emerging threats. What kind of security order do we need? One that defends its members, yes—but also engages others. One that upholds democratic values, but doesn't dismiss the grievances of those who feel excluded. One that protects borders—but also builds bridges. I call this the “democracy of international relations”—a system where no one actor imposes its will, but where dialogue, restraint, and respect shape outcomes. This means reviving diplomacy, even with rivals. To balance the anarchic international system we need pragmatism. Western narratives so far framed the conflict as a moral struggle, suppressing pragmatic solutions like neutrality for Ukraine. With the new American administration the question is whether achieving a peace deal is better alternative to the hope of defeating Putin. Perhaps we should engage cautiously with Russia and also China, prioritizing deterrence, military readiness, and strategic clarity over vague

commitments to global liberalism. We could also talk to smaller states, including those in the Global South. It means adapting our institutions—not abandoning them—to the realities of a multipolar world. By reviving platforms like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, we can foster dialogue, reduce mistrust, and prevent catastrophic escalation. A balanced approach respects both security needs and sovereignty, ensuring the Euro-Atlantic region avoids perpetual conflict. The UN needs to be reformed and more inclusive. G7 should start a dialogue with BRICS+. Shift toward a dialogue of civilizations, not imposition of values, is needed. One idea is to replace confrontation with coexistence by recognizing that security is indivisible—no state or bloc can enhance its security at the expense of others.

Point 4: Stabilizing the Western Balkans

Russia's war in Ukraine, ongoing since 2022 is reshaping the security calculus across Europe—especially in vulnerable regions like the Balkans. Soaring energy prices, inflation, and disinformation campaigns are being felt most acutely in states still outside the EU. Hybrid tactics exploit divisions in multi-ethnic societies like the Balkans. By investing in cybersecurity, energy diversification, and inclusive dialogue, we can create a security framework that reflects a multipolar world. This approach not only counters threats but also builds broader coalitions for stability.

The war has also reenergized NATO. Finland and Sweden's accession marks a historic moment, strengthening the alliance's northern flank. It shows that crises, if handled well, can galvanize unity. The lesson here is twofold: security must be proactive, not reactive. And solidarity must extend beyond formal borders. The Balkans need targeted support—economic, digital, and political—to resist malign influence and stay on the Euro-Atlantic path. Strengthening democratic institutions and fighting corruption are essential.

The Western Balkans are a microcosm of Euro-Atlantic challenges and opportunities. This region remains vulnerable—still recovering from past conflicts, still entangled in unresolved disputes, and still outside the full embrace of the EU. My research shows how stalled EU integration, ethnic tensions, and external interference—especially from Russia—threaten stability in countries like Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia. For instance, Bulgaria's objections continue to block Macedonia's EU path, fostering nationalist sentiment. EU enlargement cannot be endlessly delayed without consequences. Internal EU divisions and reform fatigue hinder progress. There is no clear timeline for membership. This breeds frustration, fuels nationalist resentment eroding trust in Euro-Atlantic institutions. Meanwhile, Serbia's ambiguous ties to Russia and the unresolved status of Kosovo keep tensions alive.

Accelerating NATO and EU enlargement can anchor these nations in a democratic framework, as seen with Macedonia's NATO membership in 2020. The lesson is clear: investing in the Balkans strengthens the entire Euro-Atlantic security architecture. Euro-Atlantic integration is the best conflict prevention mechanism. By addressing local disputes and supporting economic resilience, we can turn a fragile periphery into a strategic asset. If the Euro-Atlantic community can

deliver on its promises—while listening to local voices and respecting regional agency—the Balkans can become a model of successful integration. If not, the vacuum will be filled by others with very different interests.

Conclusion

Euro-Atlantic security is at a crossroads. We face real risks—escalation, fragmentation, democratic erosion. The challenges—war, rivalry, and hybrid threats—are daunting, but they’re also catalysts for progress. The Euro-Atlantic region faces a volatile future defined by great power competition, internal divisions, and new threats. Yet, these challenges present opportunities to strengthen NATO, deepen European integration, and adapt to a changing world. The future of Euro-Atlantic security hinges on three priorities: navigating great power tensions through diplomacy, and building an inclusive, resilient security model and stabilizing regions like the Western Balkans through integration. Let us not chase the illusions of the past. Let us build a security framework fit for the future—one that is realistic, resilient, and rooted in cooperation.

Euro-Atlantic Security: Trends and Opportunities in a Fragmented World

“May you live in interesting times.”

I recently discovered that this phrase—often cited as both a blessing and a curse—is not Chinese, as is commonly believed, but Israeli in origin. The irony is striking, because we do, indeed, live in interesting times. Times of paradox, where progress and peril coexist, and where the pace of change often outstrips our ability to adapt.

The forces shaping our world today are not only divergent—they are accelerating. And in this acceleration, we find both opportunity and risk.

The Strategic Landscape – Between Multilateralism and Trans Atlanticism

The Euro-Atlantic security architecture is being pulled in multiple directions. On one hand, we see a renewed emphasis on multilateralism—a recognition that no single nation can address today’s complex challenges alone. On the other hand, trans Atlanticism—the historic bond between Europe and North America—is being tested by shifting priorities, domestic pressures, and the rise of transactional foreign policy. This tension is not merely academic. It affects how we respond to crises, how we allocate resources, and how we define our shared values. The question is no longer whether we will act together, but whether we can.

NATO’s Strategic Adaptation in a Multi-Domain War

NATO remains the cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic defense, but it is not immune to change. The Alliance is undergoing a profound transformation, adapting to the realities of multi-domain warfare. The battlefield now includes cyber, space, and the cognitive domain, where perception can be as decisive as firepower.

We face hybrid threats that blur the line between war and peace. Disinformation, cyberattacks, and the weaponization of emerging technologies—from artificial intelligence to autonomous systems—are challenging our traditional concepts of deterrence and defense. The Arctic, once a frozen buffer, is becoming a contested space. Melting ice is opening new trade routes and resource frontiers, drawing in actors with strategic ambitions and military capabilities. Compounding this is Russia’s revised nuclear doctrine, approved in late 2024. Under this new policy, Moscow has lowered the threshold for nuclear weapons use, allowing for a nuclear response not only to weapons of mass destruction, but also to conventional attacks that pose a “critical threat” to Russian or allied sovereignty.

The ambiguity of this doctrine is deliberate. It is designed to blur red lines, to make NATO and its partners hesitate. For example, Russia now frames Ukrainian strikes using Western-supplied weapons as acts involving a nuclear-armed state—thereby

The European Union is increasingly asserting itself as a consequential actor in the realm of security and defense domain historically dominated by intergovernmentalism and, more specifically, by NATO. This evolution reflects a broader strategic recalibration within the Union, driven by a confluence of internal imperatives and external pressures. The erosion of the post-Cold War security order, the resurgence of great power competition, and the perceived volatility of transatlantic commitments have collectively catalyzed a shift in the EU's strategic posture. No longer content to function solely as a normative power or economic bloc, the Union is now actively cultivating the institutional, operational, and political capacities necessary to project itself as a credible defense actor. This transformation is manifest in several key developments. The establishment of the European Defense Fund (EDF), the activation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the articulation of the Strategic Compass represent significant milestones in the EU's journey toward strategic autonomy. These initiatives are not merely symbolic; they signal a commitment to fostering interoperability, enhancing joint capabilities, and reducing strategic dependencies—particularly in critical technologies and supply chains. Moreover, the EU's increasing engagement in crisis management operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework underscores its ambition to act as a stabilizing force in its near abroad and beyond.

However, the EU's emergence as a defense actor is not without its contradictions. Divergent threat perceptions among member states, institutional overlap with NATO, and the persistent challenge of political cohesion continue to constrain the Union's strategic coherence. Nevertheless, the trajectory is clear: the EU is no longer a peripheral player in defense discourse. It is, incrementally but unmistakably, stepping into a role that demands not only resources and readiness, but also strategic vision and political will. Yet, the EU still struggles to speak with one voice. Strategic cultures differ. Threat perceptions vary. And while the ambition for strategic autonomy is growing, the reality is constrained by manpower shortages, logistical gaps, and infrastructure limitations.

The EU's challenge is not just to build capabilities, but to build cohesion—to transform potential into power.

Internal Pressures – The Erosion from Within

Security is not only about external threats. It is also about internal resilience. Across the Euro-Atlantic space, we are witnessing polarization, disinformation, and the erosion of democratic norms.

University autonomy—a cornerstone of critical thinking and innovation—is under pressure. Far-right movements are gaining ground, often exploiting economic anxiety and cultural insecurity.

The liberal democratic perimeter, once seen as expanding, now appears to be shrinking. These trends are not isolated. They are interconnected. And they weaken our ability to act collectively and decisively.

Once heralded as an unstoppable force, the liberal democratic perimeter—the zone of states committed to democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights—now appears to be contracting rather than expanding. This reversal marks a profound shift in the global political landscape, with implications that extend far beyond the boundaries of any single region. In the aftermath of the Cold War, liberal democracy seemed ascendant. The fall of authoritarian regimes across Eastern Europe, the spread of democratic norms through international institutions, and the deepening of global interdependence all contributed to a sense of inevitable progress. The European Union's enlargement, NATO's outreach, and the proliferation of democratic transitions in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia reinforced the belief that liberal democracy was not only desirable but destined to prevail. Today, that optimism has given way to a more sobering reality. Authoritarian resilience, democratic backsliding, and illiberal populism are on the rise. In some cases, democratically elected leaders have eroded institutional checks and balances from within. In others, external actors have weaponized democratic processes themselves—using elections, media freedoms, and civil liberties as tools of influence and disruption.

Electoral interference has become a strategic instrument. Through disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and covert funding of political movements, hostile actors exploit the openness of democratic systems to sow division, undermine legitimacy, and tilt outcomes in their favor. Democracy, in this context, is no longer just a model to be defended—it is a battleground where influence is contested and vulnerabilities are exposed. Even within established democracies, the foundations of liberal governance are under strain. Polarization, institutional distrust, and attacks on the independence of the judiciary and media are weakening the internal cohesion that sustains democratic resilience. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic inequality, and the digital transformation of the public sphere have further exposed vulnerabilities in democratic systems. The shrinking of the liberal democratic perimeter is not merely a geopolitical concern—it is a strategic and normative challenge. It calls for renewed investment in democratic institutions, civic education, and transnational solidarity. If liberal democracy is to remain a viable model, it must prove not only its moral appeal but its capacity to adapt, endure, and deliver in an increasingly contested world.

Strategic Foresight – Scenarios for the Future

To navigate this complexity, I turned to strategic foresight methodology—a tool that allows us to explore plausible futures and prepare for them. Through this lens, I developed a set of scenarios to better understand where the Euro-Atlantic space might be headed. Each scenario reflects a different trajectory shaped by geopolitical shifts, technological disruption, societal polarization, and institutional resilience.

1. Fortress Atlantic – A renewed, cohesive transatlantic alliance, resilient and strategically aligned.
2. Fragmented Atlantic – A weakened alliance, marked by diverging interests and diminished trust.
3. Multipolar Competition – A world of great power rivalry, with the Euro-Atlantic space caught in the middle.
4. Antagonistic Polarization – Deep societal divisions eroding democratic institutions from within.
5. EU Rising – The European Union gains strategic autonomy and becomes a global security actor.
6. Fragmented Cooperation – Ad hoc coalitions replace structured alliances.
7. Cooperative Coexistence – A pragmatic, rules-based order where competition is managed through diplomacy.

I personally hope and pray over - Fortress Atlantic. It envisions a renewed transatlantic alliance—resilient, cohesive, and strategically aligned in the face of accelerating global challenges. In an era of hybrid threats, technological disruption, and geopolitical fragmentation, this scenario offers a path forward grounded in shared purpose and collective strength. Building Fortress Atlantic requires more than defense budgets and policy papers. It demands trust, political will, and a recommitment to the values that bind us. We must be clear-eyed: the future will not wait for consensus. It will reward those who are prepared, adaptable, and strategically aligned.

But as Thucydides reminds us in the Melian Dialogue, “hope is by nature an expensive commodity.” And in today’s world, it is often the first casualty of realpolitik.

So where do we go from here?

In today’s volatile and interconnected world, what we need most is strategic clarity—a shared understanding of our values, our threats, and the instruments of power we must wield wisely. But clarity alone is not enough.

The reality is sobering: the world around us is unlikely to become more secure. The threats we face—geopolitical, technological, societal—are evolving faster than our institutions. In this environment, resilience is no longer a choice; it is a strategic imperative.

We must invest not only in capabilities, but in cohesion. Not only in deterrence, but in dialogue. Not only in hard power, but in the resilience- individual, institutional and societal.

Resilience is not about returning to the status quo, since there is no status quo anymore. It’s about adapting, enduring, and evolving in the face of disruption. It’s about ensuring that our societies remain free, open, and capable of shaping their own futures—even when the global environment grows more hostile.

We must also renew our commitment to democratic governance, academic freedom, and the rule of law. These are not luxuries. They are strategic assets. The values our society is built upon.

The future of Euro-Atlantic security will not be written by the strongest alone, but by those who can adapt, collaborate, and lead with purpose.

We live in interesting times. But whether they become dangerous or transformative is up to us.

Thank you.

Towards a Holistic Approach to Security and the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans region finds itself at a critical intersection of regional politics and European integration. Decades after the Yugoslav dissolution, these small states have oriented their foreign policies toward Euro-Atlantic alliances as a matter of survival. Research highlights that North Macedonia, for example, viewed EU and NATO membership, initially as a strategic necessity to defend the country's security rather than as a way of domestic identification with European values. Integration of EU values into the political rhetoric of officials occurred much later (Koneska, 2012). In practice, this realist approach meant prioritizing international alliances to guarantee security amid post-conflict turbulence and unresolved disputes.

However, historical and ongoing bilateral disputes in the region have complicated this integration path. North Macedonia's experience is telling: it changed its constitutional name to resolve a long-standing bilateral dispute with Greece, paving the way for NATO membership and progress toward EU accession. More recently, Bulgaria's veto on EU accession talks exemplifies how regional politics can directly stall enlargement. Analysts and researchers warn that failure to implement these bilateral contests may block further EU integration, plunging the country into deeper isolation and crisis (LSEideas, 2013). This saga underscores a broader point: protracted disputes and scepticism among EU members not only slow the enlargement process, but also threaten domestic stability in aspirant countries.

At the same time, my research work suggests a paradoxical silver lining – a unifying effect of the Euro-Atlantic vision on multi-ethnic societies. In North Macedonia, the prospect of NATO and EU membership became a rare point of consensus between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. A Euro-Atlantic oriented foreign policy can serve as a unifying factor for these groups, such that “every external threat to [these] foreign policy objectives may result in domestic cleavages” (Osmani and Leka, 2022). In other words, when integration is delayed or derailed, it risks reviving internal ethnic tensions. This dynamic highlights that regional peace and internal cohesion hinge upon a credible, undistracted path toward EU (and NATO) integration.

The Rule of Law: Cornerstone of Democratic Consolidation

Strengthening the rule of law is the decisive factor for the Western Balkans' European future. A recent study focused on the Western Balkans concludes that rule of law deficits are the primary barrier holding back EU accession, affecting everything from economic development to public trust. The main findings suggest that robust rule of law positively affects EU integration and growth, and conversely, without rule of law progress the EU path stalls. Put simply, there is no way to shortcut fundamental reforms, particularly judicial independence, anti-corruption, government

accountability, etc., which form the bedrock of democratic consolidation and the precondition for EU membership (Marović, Prelec, Kmezić, 2019).

Yet, despite ever-stricter EU conditionality in this realm, on-the-ground progress has been sluggish. The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) observes a retreat of democracy, instead of a strengthened rule of law in the six Western Balkan states. This paper analysis views transformation as a very slow process and it raises concern about the trend of backsliding even after countries began EU accession talks. This phenomenon, sometimes labeled as “stabilitocracy”, refers to leaders paying lip service to EU integration while consolidating power through patronage networks (Kmezić, 2018). Powerful elites continue to dominate institutions for personal gain, blocking real reforms and weakening democracy behind a façade of good governance (Marović, Prelec, Kmezić, 2019).

The implication for EU integration is profound. EU officials have acknowledged that previous approaches failed to address these deep-rooted issues. The New Methodology for Enlargement now prioritizes the rule of law chapters (cluster 1) in negotiations and insists on credible track records of reform.

However, domestic political will is the decisive element. Western Balkan governments must go beyond nominal compliance and truly implement reforms, from depoliticizing judiciaries, protecting media freedom, increasing professionalism in public administration, to battling cronyism and corruption in public institutions, in order to reverse democratic backsliding. Conversely, cleaning up governance and affirming democratic values are investments in long-term security and prosperity.

Euro-Atlantic Cooperation for Regional Security and Reform

A holistic approach to security and rule of law in the Western Balkans necessitates strong Euro-Atlantic cooperation. The European Union and NATO each bring critical tools to the table: NATO provides hard security guarantees and crisis response, while the EU drives governance reforms and development, through its soft power tools. Hence, closer coordination between the two has become increasingly important, especially as hybrid threats menace the region. The EU and NATO themselves recognize the need to “strengthen cooperation and adopt a whole-of-society approach” to counter complex challenges like disinformation and foreign malign interference, for which the Western Balkans are a prime target (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2023).

Joint EU-NATO initiatives now focus on cyber defense, strategic communications, and training local institutions to withstand malign influence. These efforts are crucial, as external actors actively exploit governance weaknesses, using propaganda, financial (including energy) leverage and even paramilitary links to undermine Western integration. By presenting a united front, the Euro-Atlantic community can both defend the region against immediate security threats and embed it in a framework of democratic values (Brethous and Kovalčíková, 2023).

The strategic objective is clear: for over three decades, a “concerted approach on security and stability in the Western Balkans” has been a shared goal of Brussels and Washington. (Brethous and Kovalčíková, 2023) Now is the time to elevate that partnership. EU-led dialogue initiatives (such as the Serbia–Kosovo normalization talks) backed by U.S. diplomacy, and NATO’s open-door policy complementing the EU’s enlargement policy, are examples of synergy in action. Every Western Balkan country has either joined NATO or aspires to Euro-Atlantic structures, indicating a popular commitment to the transatlantic trajectory. This should be met with equal commitment from the EU and NATO to see these countries succeed. Enhanced cooperation means aligning security assistance with governance reform agendas, for instance, coordinating anti-corruption training with defense capacity building, and sharing intelligence on organized crime that straddles borders and corrodes the rule of law.

Crucially, Euro-Atlantic cooperation also sends a powerful message of reassurance. EU’s closer engagement with the Western Balkan countries serves as a guarantee that the region will not remain a grey geopolitical zone, that may be exploited by other malign forces. By working hand-in-hand, NATO and the EU reinforce the credibility of Euro-Atlantic integration promises, which in turn incentivizes local leaders to undertake tough reforms.

Actionable Recommendations for a Stronger Euro-Atlantic Future

Reaffirm the EU’s Commitment and Address “Enlargement Fatigue”: The EU should clearly restate that integration in the EU is essential for the region’s future, backing this with a credible roadmap and interim milestones by 2030 (Osmani and Osmani, 2024).

Resolve Bilateral Disputes through Diplomacy: Protracted disputes must be tackled head-on with EU/U.S. mediation. The Prespa Agreement (which helped resolve the name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece) is a successful template. Similar proactive facilitation is needed for other open disputes. Removing these roadblocks will prevent external vetoes from derailing reforms and stop domestic frustrations from boiling over (Leka et al., 2025).

Strengthen Democratic Values from the Bottom Up: Encourage greater civic engagement and oversight to hold governments accountable to their EU commitments. Civil society and youth in the Western Balkans remain largely pro-European; they should be empowered through EU programs, people-to-people exchanges, and support for grassroots rule-of-law initiatives (Marović, Prelec, and Kmezić, 2019).

Enhance EU-NATO Joint Initiatives: Building on the 2023 EU-NATO Joint Declaration, launch joint task forces on hybrid threats specific to the Balkans. For example, an EU-NATO hybrid threat cell could be established in the region to share intelligence on disinformation, election interference, and cyber attacks. As noted by EU security experts, a whole-of-society approach is needed to bolster resilience (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2023). This includes training journalists, educating the public on media literacy, and securing critical infrastructure

(where NATO's expertise can complement EU funding). Regular staff exchanges between EU and NATO missions in Balkan countries can further improve coordination.

Facilitate Economic Integration to Undergird Reform: Economic stagnation can undermine democratic optimism. The EU's proposed Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which would integrate the region into the EU single market and increase investment, should be fast-tracked (European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2024). Tying economic benefits to rule-of-law progress (a form of "more for more" approach) can incentivize governments to persist with tough reforms (Osmani and Osmani, 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, a holistic approach to security and the rule of law in the Western Balkans means recognizing the interplay between peace, prosperity, and justice. As scholarship illustrates, foreign policy and domestic cohesion are two sides of the same coin in this region. Euro-Atlantic integration is not just a diplomatic goal, but a societal project that binds communities together and fosters resilience from both external and internal threats. The Euro-Atlantic community must therefore act with unity and resolve: bolstering democratic institutions and values while safeguarding the region from those who would destabilize it. If we succeed in this comprehensive endeavor, the reward will be a Western Balkans firmly anchored in the Euro-Atlantic family, which is stable, free, and at peace, benefiting the entire Western Alliance.

Strengthening the Rule of Law to Secure Euro-Atlantic Security: The Role of Criminal Justice in Fragile Geopolitical Contexts

Introduction

The rule of law is more than just a legal notion; it is a vital strategic foundation for maintaining peace, stability, and democratic robustness. In the current Euro-Atlantic landscape, it functions as a crucial barrier against the decline of democratic principles and the disintegration of institutions. International bodies have consistently underscored its significance, highlighting the rule of law as a key asset for Europe's security and integration.

Scholarly research reinforces this standpoint, viewing the rule of law as an essential component in building stable political and societal structures, particularly in nations experiencing democratic transitions (Fukuyama, 2011). As global threats transition from traditional military confrontations to intricate hybrid and cyber challenges, the necessity for strong legal institutions becomes increasingly apparent.

Key Trends Shaping Euro-Atlantic Security

Recent insights in the field of security studies indicate that the future stability of the Euro-Atlantic region will be shaped increasingly by unconventional threats. Instead of traditional military confrontations, the dominant challenges now include digital vulnerabilities, transnational organized crime, and institutional disintegration, which significantly influence the geopolitical landscape.

A major, often neglected, aspect of these issues is the erosion of trust in judicial systems, particularly in smaller or transitional countries. Nations such as North Macedonia exemplify how the spread of disinformation, the manipulation of public institutions, and entrenched corruption can erode democratic structures from within. These developments are consistent with academic assessments that highlight institutional degradation and legal fragility as mounting threats in vulnerable democracies (Fukuyama, 2014).

In light of these challenges, the rule of law must be reconceptualized as a proactive and evolving mechanism for defending democratic governance. Strong legal institutions not only uphold justice but also bolster a society's ability to withstand both internal and external destabilizing forces.

The Rule of Law as a Shield Against Destabilization

The rule of law is broadly acknowledged as the cornerstone of democratic governance and institutional legitimacy. When legal standards are enforced fairly and transparently, they cultivate public confidence and help fortify societies against extremism, disinformation, and foreign

interference. This preventative role is particularly vital in geopolitically fragile regions, where institutions are susceptible to manipulation or political domination.

The European Union has persistently underscored that the rule of law represents not only a foundational value but also a necessary criterion for accession and integration. Nations that lack judicial stability and effective legal systems are especially vulnerable to hybrid threats and undemocratic forces (European Commission, 2024).

Legal theorists further contend that the steady and impartial enforcement of the rule of law serves as a structural safeguard against authoritarianism and the degradation of civil rights (Safjan, 2024). Therefore, beyond its normative significance, the rule of law should be seen as a vital strategic element within the broader framework of Euro-Atlantic security.

Building Institutional Resilience in the Euro-Atlantic Community

Achieving enduring resilience across the Euro-Atlantic region necessitates more than conventional defense measures. Although military readiness remains vital, lasting security is equally contingent on the robustness and legitimacy of judicial institutions. A well-functioning legal framework—one that ensures procedural justice, judicial autonomy, and accountability—significantly strengthens a state's capacity to confront intricate security threats, including cyberattacks and transnational crime.

Contemporary research highlights the critical need to bolster investigative capabilities and secure effective prosecution of offenses that threaten democratic integrity, such as corruption and electoral violations (Marques & Albuquerque, 2023). In this context, criminal justice systems are instrumental not only in enforcing the law but also in protecting the normative structures that uphold democratic governance.

The Role of Criminal Justice in Securing Democratic Stability

Criminal justice systems extend beyond their punitive function; they represent essential structural pillars for maintaining societal order, fostering public trust, and securing long-term democratic stability. By conducting impartial investigations and prosecutions, these systems uphold the principles of legal equality and accountability, thereby promoting social cohesion.

In geopolitically fragile settings, the integrity of the justice system is a crucial component of national security. A system that operates transparently, adheres to procedural fairness, and remains insulated from political interference plays a vital role in preventing state capture and mitigating public disenchantment. Contemporary legal scholarship emphasizes that the perception of justice being carried out is equally as important as its substantive outcomes (Marques & Albuquerque, 2023).

This normative function of criminal justice becomes especially pertinent in tackling contemporary threats such as corruption, cybercrime, and illicit financial transactions. These

offenses compromise institutional credibility from within and necessitate strong prosecutorial frameworks rooted in ethical conduct and technical expertise.

International Cooperation and Institutional Partnerships

In today's context of transnational crime and hybrid security threats, no country can uphold the rule of law in isolation. Regional and international collaboration plays a pivotal role in fortifying judicial systems, standardizing legal frameworks, and expanding operational capacities.

Institutions such as the OSCE, European Union, GRECO, and the Council of Europe contribute through technical assistance, legal reform guidance, and independent oversight. Their involvement is particularly vital in the Western Balkans, where institutional reform is a foundational requirement for integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

NATO's involvement highlights the intrinsic link between security and the rule of law. Beyond its traditional military scope, NATO fosters institutional durability by supporting law enforcement training, developing cybersecurity systems, and advancing strategic governance. Likewise, agencies such as EUROPOL and INTERPOL facilitate cross-border investigations, intelligence collaboration, and coordination of prosecutorial methodologies (Russo et al., 2023).

The Strategic Role of Small States

Although often seen as beneficiaries of security support, small states are in fact essential contributors to collective resilience. Through the promotion of good governance, adherence to the rule of law, and the maintenance of institutional coherence, they contribute to regional stability and serve as models of democratic practice.

In the Western Balkan region, small states are uniquely positioned to lead in areas such as legal reform, anti-corruption policy, and the implementation of international norms. Their influence lies not in material strength, but in normative leadership and their capacity to build public confidence through institutional credibility (OSCE, 2024).

Case Study: North Macedonia and the Rule of Law Reform

North Macedonia serves as a compelling example for analyzing the relationship between legal reform, institutional resilience, and Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions. As both a NATO member and an EU candidate state, it has made notable strides in aligning its legal systems with European standards. Nevertheless, enduring challenges persist in critical areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption enforcement, and political accountability (European Commission, 2024).

Despite these difficulties, North Macedonia's ongoing collaboration with international bodies and its commitment to reform highlight its strategic importance in fostering regional security. The performance of its justice system functions as a benchmark for the broader Western Balkan region,

where legal reform is viewed not only as a national necessity but also as a key condition for integration.

Research indicates that for reforms to be effective, they must be accompanied by deep-seated cultural and organizational shifts within the judiciary, policing, and prosecutorial institutions. Absent genuine independence and adequate resource allocation, legal harmonization efforts alone are insufficient to ensure lasting results (Russo et al., 2023).

Innovation, Collaboration, and Democratic Oversight

A significant and urgent issue within North Macedonia's justice system is its limited capacity in cyber forensics, particularly within the Ministry of Interior. This deficiency hampers the effective investigation of cybercrime and transnational organized crime, thereby increasing the justice sector's vulnerability to modern security threats (OSCE, 2024).

To confront these challenges, a comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategy is imperative. Targeted investments in academic expertise, professional training, and enhanced coordination among institutions are essential. Moreover, universities, research centers, and civil society actors must be fully integrated into national frameworks for justice reform and institutional strengthening.

Innovation in this domain must transcend mere technological advancement. It also involves establishing new avenues for democratic engagement, reinforcing mechanisms for public oversight, and ensuring that reform efforts are anchored in transparency and accountability. As highlighted by the OHCHR (2025), civic participation plays a vital role in enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of justice institutions.

Conclusion

The intricate link between justice and security defines the essence of contemporary governance, particularly within fragile geopolitical contexts. As outlined throughout this paper, the rule of law should be viewed not only as a normative ideal but also as a strategic tool for preserving democratic order, institutional credibility, and societal strength.

Criminal justice systems occupy a pivotal position within this framework. Their capacity to investigate and prosecute offenses, administer justice impartially, and sustain public confidence directly impacts a nation's resilience against both internal and external threats. In the Euro-Atlantic context, legal reform must be perceived not as a procedural obligation but as a foundational strategy for upholding democratic principles and ensuring enduring stability.

North Macedonia's experience demonstrates the transformative capacity of continuous legal reform, active international engagement, and innovation in the public sector. Nonetheless, achieving full institutional integrity is a gradual process that necessitates unwavering commitment and sustained investment in both human capital and structural development.

Ultimately, justice without security is unviable, and security devoid of justice is fragile. To truly reinforce the Euro-Atlantic space, the rule of law must be embraced as a fundamental pillar of collective resilience—beyond formal requirements or accession criteria.

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The Shared Moral Values in Orthodoxy and Islam – A Basis for Restoration of Trust

Introduction

I would like to emphasize that this presentation stems from research in which my colleagues and I explored the basic moral values in Orthodox Christianity and Islam, elaborated on their appearance in the Holy Books, as well as their characteristic manifestations.

Religion has long been associated with intolerance, violence, terrorism, and war, often identified as a significant factor in the emergence and escalation of conflicts. Throughout history, religious narratives have frequently been exploited by various actors to serve political or other strategic objectives. In many international disputes, the core teachings of both Christianity and Islam have been distorted or selectively interpreted to justify conflict. However, numerous scholars and observers argue that religion is rarely the root cause of such conflicts. In fact, religious dimensions may only appear to be central, while the actual causes often lie in political, social, economic, or ethnic tensions. Religious affiliation, nevertheless, can play a crucial role in shaping individual motivations and actions. Prejudices and ideological narratives are often cultivated within and between different religious or ethnic communities. One underlying reason for this may be a lack of knowledge and understanding—both of one's own faith and of the beliefs of others. This ignorance frequently breeds intolerance, which in turn fuels prejudice, hostility, and ultimately, conflict. When both sides fail to grasp the true essence of their religions, they may act competitively, attempting to assert the superiority of their own faith, which undermines opportunities for mutual understanding and peacebuilding.

History provides ample evidence that religion, rather than serving as a bridge for dialogue and reconciliation, has at times been misused to justify division and violence. Both Christianity and Islam were born in turbulent historical contexts, and their sacred texts contain verses that can be (and have been) exploited by fundamentalist actors to justify hostility toward perceived others. The selective interpretation of these texts—whether from the Bible or the Quran —represents a critical risk, particularly when used to fuel exclusivist or extremist narratives. In this context, religion can become not a source of cohesion, but a vehicle for fragmentation. However, at the core of all major religious traditions lies not only faith, but also a moral framework. Given the confessional landscape of the Balkans, where Orthodox Christianity and Islam predominate, the analysis centers on the shared moral values of these traditions, exploring their potential to serve as a basis for interreligious dialogue and conflict transformation. But considering the theme of this conference, and specifically the panel on "Post-Conflict Societies: Rebuilding security and the rule of law", I singled out the moral value of equity.

Methodological Approach

To identify the shared moral-value orientation of Christianity and Islam, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on selected passages from the Bible and the Qur'an. This analysis was based on interpretations offered by prominent theologians from both traditions. The focus was placed on the values of benevolence, equity, and moderation, examining both their explicit mention and implicit manifestations within the sacred texts. The passages analyzed were those identified by theologians as representative of these moral principles. Particular attention was given to whether these values were presented as direct commandments or general recommendations, as well as to the severity of the sanctions associated with their neglect or violation. Additionally, the analysis explored whether the identified values are integral to the original context of the texts or have been subject to interpretive abstraction. This methodological approach enabled a descriptive mapping of the moral dimensions of Orthodox Christianity and Islam, establishing a foundation for recognizing benevolence, equity, and moderation as shared moral values across both religious traditions.

Equity in Orthodoxy

Equity serves as a foundational principle in shaping the concept of humanity; it must first be instilled in human consciousness in order to enable individuals to pursue higher, more humane aspirations. From a philosophical and ethical perspective, equity is situated within the moral domain—it constitutes a core moral value. As a personal moral attribute, equity reflects a consciously chosen mode of thought and behavior guided by ethical reasoning. At the same time, equity can also be understood as an objective standard—manifested when legal systems, institutional orders, or social arrangements are evaluated as just or unjust. According to Christian ethics, the content of evangelical equity differs from general human justice, in that it implies the entire religious-moral behavior of people, which is created through faith, and which is God's grace. From the theological point of view, it is heavenly righteousness that is obtained through faith in Jesus Christ, that is, that righteousness is given by God through faith. At the same time, Christian equity is not justice from law (*jus*), but from faith (*lex credendi*), since it is so elevated, sublimated and spiritualized, that it is fundamentally different from legal justice. Equity, according to the gospel, is more like unselfish, forgiving love than common human justice. Hence, according to this concept and definition of equity, it can be concluded that the one who believes in God with all his/her soul and fulfills God's will is righteous.

God's justice in Christianity is not presented as juridical, nor as legal, but as moral, ethical. In manifesting His eternal and absolute justice, God does not act as a heartless, cruel, and fierce judge: "The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works." (Psalm 145:17). In Christianity there is a harmonious connection of God's justice and God's love. The Church Fathers and Teachers, in their works, indicate that God's love is just, and that God remains a just judge even when God forgives sins and pardons sinners. For the believer, the law of justice is God's institution just like the principle of love, that is, the law of justice is God's law. The principle of love and the law of equity have their respective areas of validity in Christianity. At the same time, love

as the basic and highest moral principle includes the entire content of equity. But love is not absent in human equity, only that there it is limited to the most elementary human rights, that is, to the striving to provide them for every person, in order that the person can exist, develop, and be formed as a person. This distinction should not be perceived as a ranking of values, nor as a basis for perceiving equity as undervalued in relation to love. Where, in Christianity, equity is to be applied and advocated, it is not to be substituted for love. Christian love transcends equity but does not abolish it. Equity is a regulator of affirmed moral obligations, and it has a significant social role in making people's lives easier. Hence, in this area love would not only be out of place and could not be a creative principle but would act as a disorganizing and destructive principle. At the same time, equity has a general human form in the Old Testament, due to the spiritual and moral conditions of man at that time. The principle of love, which is required in the New Testament, can be accepted only by a person who respects and guides his life according to elementary moral values. In order to achieve this, the human in the Old Testament was given many moral commandments and orders, starting with God's commandments.

In the New Testament, equity approaches the realm of morality in a way that partially abandons the crude form of commandment. According to the announcement of the principle of love, and equity as one of its manifestations, it takes the form of a moral principle. Therefore, after observing the commandments given in the Old Testament, the New Testament person should not go back to disobeying them. In the New Testament, equity is also indicated through the basic moral principle that precedes the moral-spiritual preparation of humans for acceptance and guidance according to the principle of love. In spite of the fact that in the New Testament the principle of love is a basic principle, human justice is also accepted, acknowledging its appropriate value.

Equity in Islam

Equity in Islam is presented as a value, a principle that should be present in every aspect of human life and includes the entire behavior of people. At the very root of the Muslim understanding of the law is the idea that law is inherent and, in its essence, has a religious character. Its essence represents the idea of God as a sovereign master whose will is law. People's role is to discover, formulate and carry out God's will. Therefore, from the very beginning of the history of Islam, law has been seen as an integral part or an offshoot of the concept of *Sharia* (God-given pattern of human behavior). Hence, its foundation must be found in God's revelation: the Quran must be the primary and only ruler of human life and the source of law. *Sharia*, or Islamic law, is derived from the Quran and the *Sunnah* (the practice and sayings of the Prophet), and is interpreted through the consensus of scholars and analogical reasoning. It encompasses both personal religious practices and broader legal and ethical obligations. Building upon this general framework, the Islamic law, according to its original intention, is presented more as a system of moral obligations and their non-compliance and violation, and less as a specific code. Therefore, every book related to Islamic law begins with a discussion of religious duties. In that aspect, human actions are ethically

classified into five categories: mandatory (*farḍ* or *wājib*), recommended (*mandūb* or *mustaḥabb*), neutral (*mubāḥ*), reprehensible (*makrūh*), and forbidden (*ḥarām*). According to the religious application, starting from the earliest period, *Sharia* means "way of the good life": it includes religious values expressed functionally and through concrete terms, how human life would be directed. Also, it is a practical concept that encompasses all human behavior. It includes all types of behavior: spiritual, mental and physical. All legal and social matters, as well as human behavior, are brought under *Sharia* as a comprehensive principle of life. Thus, justice in Islam is not presented exclusively as legal or statutory, but the moral characteristic (dimension) is primarily highlighted.

God's punishment represents God's will pronounced for a certain purpose, which in Islam is intended to indicate that man has crossed the natural limits of his own existence. When punishing, Allah does not seek revenge and does not intend to destroy the sinner, but to improve him, to make him a true believer. Through punishment, a person becomes aware of his mistakes, which gives him a chance to improve and direct his life on the right path. The righteous behavior of the believers is the confirmation of faith in Allah. That is why everything he does should be based on equity, without the slightest discrimination, pressure, or tyranny, love, honor and help. In Islam, equity is a basic condition for the functioning of the community. In the Islamic community, progress and development are conditioned by its implementation in relations between people. Only through equity will all people be able to exercise their rights, which will achieve equality and satisfaction. Adherence to equity must not be left out even in situations in which loved ones are involved, and even to the detriment of oneself or loved ones. One of the characteristic manifestations of the equity in Islam is the value of honesty. Sincerity in Islam is presented as a congruence between words, feelings and what is spoken about. It directs a person to do good deeds, devoid of any bad intention. It is as important at community level as it is on an individual level. It represents the foundation of society without which all ties would be broken. One cannot imagine a community that does not cooperate with each other on the principle of honesty.

Conclusion

The persistent association of religion with intolerance, violence, terrorism, and war has deep historical roots and remains a prevalent narrative today. Religion is often identified as a key factor in the emergence and escalation of conflict. Throughout history, both Christianity and Islam have at times been supplanted by ideologized interpretations—Christian or Islamic ideologies—used to advance specific political agendas. This instrumentalization of religion, coupled with a widespread lack of understanding of one's own and others' religious traditions, has contributed to the formation of prejudices that distort the true essence of religion. Rather than serving as a foundation for dialogue and reconciliation, religion is too often perceived through a lens that reinforces division. However, the moral values at the heart of Orthodox Christianity and Islam—rooted in their respective sacred texts—offer a powerful counter-narrative. The identification

and analysis of shared moral principles, particularly the value of equity, reveal a significant area of convergence between the two traditions. As presented in the moral teachings of both the Bible and the Quran, equity is not a marginal or secondary value, rather, it is a core ethical imperative that both religions expect their adherents to uphold.

This shared emphasis underscores the potential of equity to serve as a common moral ground. The convergence of Christian and Islamic teachings on this value highlights the possibility of viewing religion not as a source of conflict, but as a platform for peacebuilding, mutual understanding, and the restoration of trust between conflicting parties. Recognizing this commonality may thus offer a constructive path toward reimagining the role of religion in post-conflict contexts—not as a driver of division, but as a force for reconciliation and moral cohesion.

Post-Conflict Democracy and Rule of Law in Macedonia: Citizens' Positions and Possibilities

Key points:

What were the general features of trust and institutional rebuilding process post 2001 conflict in Macedonia?

The context of (dis)functionality of consociational democracy in Macedonia

Favourable conditions and solutions for re-introducing majority democracy and civil society

Institutional capture as part of the political and legal processes – prolonged effects of redistribution of political power and unlawful redistribution of public resources

Citizens' positions and possibilities regarding social well-being, political and legal trust and engagement

What political, legal system and society should we build towards social cohesion?

1. General overview of the trust and institutional rebuilding process post 2001 conflict

- Novel solutions in the political system
- Novel institutional and legal mechanisms for systemic and societal inclusion
- Compromised rule of law:
 - Erosion of trust in legal and political intuitions
 - Pragmatism of accountability of previous conflict parties. Goes to extremes, such as lack of accountability and amnesties that are in conflict with international law (such as crimes against humanity)
 - Prolonged corrupt system, new forms of functioning of the political elites (all segments included in state capture and unlawful division of public resources)
 - Prolonged effects of social and political disparities among segments

2. New (and sustainable?) governmental solutions > consociational democracy

- Consociational democracy is adopted in societies that usually experience certain instability, transition, radical changes or are simply facing the challenge of self-defining long enough so that that situation produces hardship that overflows to every area of the political and socio-economic system.
- **Western democracies - democracies** and **human rights** through course of **evolution** vs. the **Balkan states** that have **narrower statehood experience**

3. Legal genesis

The Constitution of RM from 1991

- Envisaged solutions in the Constitution of RM from 1991:
 - Regarding the type of democracy – MAJORITY
 - Regarding the place and nature of human rights – the INDIVIDUAL in the center of the concept, basis for civil society
 - High standards for protection of minorities

Elements of consociational democracy, legal framework and realization of the consociational democracy in Republic of Macedonia

- Lijphart's theory of consociational democracy
- Ohrid Framework Agreement is practically a mirror reflection of this basic Lijphart's nomenclature translated into
- 15 Amendments (IV-XVIII) of the Constitution of RM 1991 thus establishing the legal framework upon which Macedonian political system is built ever since.
- Conditions of CD in general and in RM:
 - GRAND COALITION – in RM no legal act - “naturally” formed, compliant to the legal basis of the decision-making process
 - THE RIGHT TO VETO of all political actors – in RM it is the Badinter majority (ex. am. VIII, X, XI, XII)
 - PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF THE SEGMENTS– in RM legal basis – the Constitution (Am. VI, but also XIII, XIV and XV) and several laws, such as Local government law, Law on public servants etc .
 - HIGH LEVEL OF INDEPENDENCE OF THE SEGMENTS– in RM decentralization, accentuated previously stipulated cultural and linguistic rights in the Constitution and cumulative use of the right to veto when rights of minority in the decision-making process are concerned

4. Critique of the consociational democracy, generally and in Macedonian context

- Consociational democracy is generally disintegrative
- GRAND COALITION – not a problem *per se*, although:
 - repetitive representatives in the Assembly and units of local government, not carrying political responsibility
 - Hybrid membership political parties – a process that must take place for the purpose of establishing majority democracy- would make the criterion ‘grand coalition’ obsolete
- THE VETO:
 - if moderately used - might enslave the institutions and impede the dynamics and even the elementary functionality of the political system
 - if used extremely – tyranny of minority
 - In any case – a functional hindrance

- PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF SEGMENTS
- Long-term highly problematic because of the issue of professionalism and upholding merit system
- Timeframe for affirmative action – 10 years, with possible repetition/reprogramming if the vulnerable group is still at a low level of practicing its human rights.
- In RM - successful, abundant and sufficient in terms of realized measures (number of employed civil servants and incumbents, quality of given tasks, education, position in the system etc.) and expired term
- SEPARATE LIFE, NOT ONLY DECISION-MAKING of elements leads to even greater segmentation of society and instead of building integrative and inclusive institutions, education and social practices, Macedonia dwells into differentiation – SALIENT PROBLEM
- UNDERMINING THE RIGHTS OF OTHER MINORITIES
 - Long-term insisting on bi-national system or on consociational democracy as it is, grossly undermines other ethnic groups contributing to the society
 - Denomination, lesser factoring, diminished role of these ethnicities by OFA

Namely, the resources are limited it exhausts the capacity of the state to take care or to policy-cover other vulnerable groups which rights are not exercised on high level

- INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS SUPPRESSED BY COLLECTIVE RIGHTS
 - The individual in the center of the concept of human rights and civil society is the most prominent ideal towards any democracy should strive, however CD does the opposite - by providing collective political opportunities inhibits the development of the notion of the individual and negatively impacts frivolous membership in parties, interest groups, civil organizations etc.
 - Collective rights are an anachronism and should be left in the past, except for deeply injured human rights groups

5. Additional critique of political and institutional shifting

Reaffirming unlawfulness of public acting by all segments but with power shift towards Albanian governing party

- 2023, 166 law proposals have been initiated, out of which only 23 in completely ordinary procedure (or 14%).
- Who was the least compliant to the ordinary legislative procedure? All actors from the same governing party:
 - The President of the Assembly who has a crucial role in the legislative procedure, regarding admitting, in this case, faulty documentation;
 - the President of the Assembly's compulsory working body on EU harmonization procedure;

- the ministers that proved to be the least compliant to the legislative procedure in terms of submission of inadequate documentation and legal drafting. The Ministry of Finance has most frequently initiated legislation both according to the procedure for harmonization with the EU law and according to the shortened procedure.
- Overall, allowing frequent improper application of the EU harmonization procedure and the shortened procedure, for the Assembly implies:
 - devaluation of its control function over the executive,
 - undermined rule of law by diminished quality of adopted legislature and disrupted legislative process,
 - party dominance, mostly by a single party within a complacent governing coalition, over the institutions, procedures and democratic principles.
- This confirmed that the state capture is still an ongoing stance, one that would need substantial prolonged changes in the political culture, monitoring and inclusive practices, electoral system and even in the constitutional-natured legislature itself.

6. Favourable conditions for re-introducing majority democracy in RM

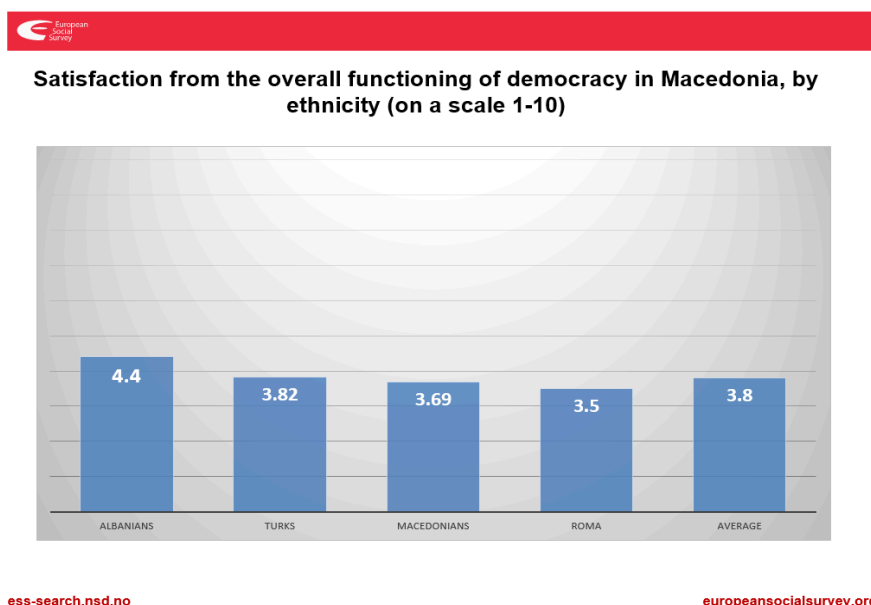
- Legal basis in RM for achieving saliency of the individual is primarily the Constitution, the provisions in the laws that refer to non-discrimination both in the domestic and the international law ratified in RM compliant to the Constitution
- Social maturity
 - Low levels of discrimination in social interactions
 - Work to be done
- Political preconditions
 - Political parties with ethnically heterogeneous membership – gradually to be fulfilled
 - Civil sector activism - fulfilled
 - NGO membership - fulfilled

7. Solutions and functional basis towards re-introducing majority democracy in the Republic of North Macedonia

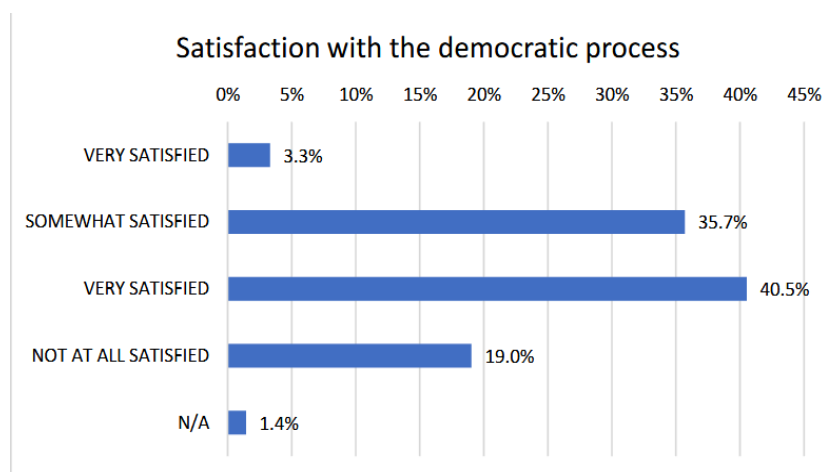
- **Sufficient time passed** and political and legal reforms realized in terms of OFA
- Building **trust** among segments and political actors
- **The political will and rhetoric of the political leaders** needs to be inclusive and respectful and to value the domestic democracy, it shouldn't follow the current path of using the ethnic and nationalistic element to mask disability of delivering substantial benefits for the citizens
- Development of areas and actors influencing **political culture – education and media**

- **Finishing the initialized process regarding the languages** – controlled contents and effects of the Law on languages and ratification of the ECRML (1992)
- Direction and future of the vivid process of **decentralization**
 - Competences
 - Finances
- The integrative process of RM in the **EU and NATO**
 - Guaranteeing territorial integrity
 - Providing democratic aid and resources for realization and development of human rights, capacity and institution building
 - Guaranteeing standards of minority rights
 - Developmental tendencies regarding economy, education, science, technological development
 - Evolutive approach towards finding new forms of political organization
- **The role of the political parties** and their membership
 - Action of the parties to attract different ethnicities, functional identification and broader inclusive platforms
- The great **role of the citizens and the civil sector** as whole in these processes

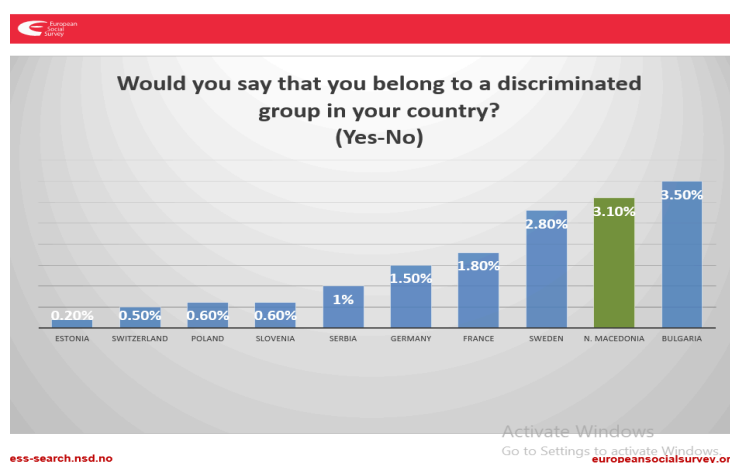
8. Illustrative citizens' views, potentially relevant to participation of proper rebuilding of institutions and trust depends on citizen's view on crucial systems, like functioning democracy and rule of law



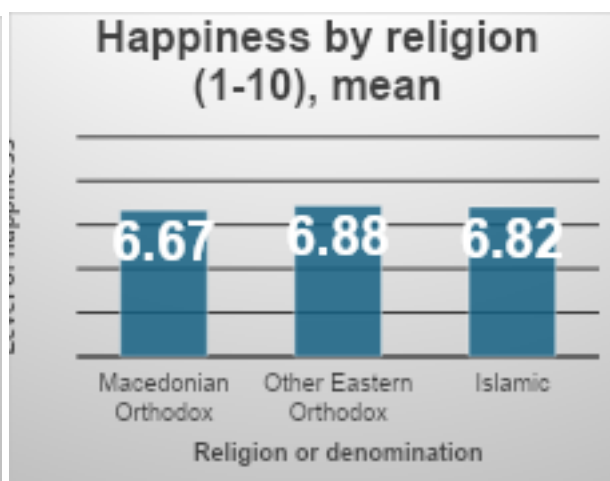
Source: ESS data, Round 10, 2022.



Source: CSES – Comparative study of electoral systems (2024).

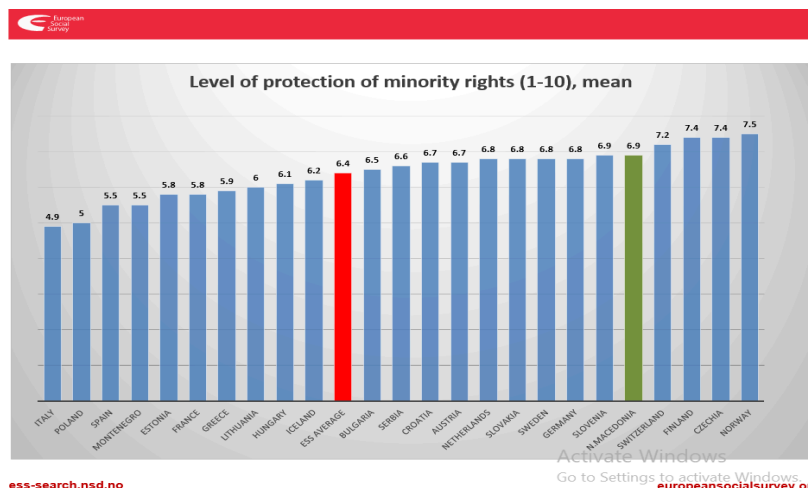


Source: ESS data, Round 10, 2022.

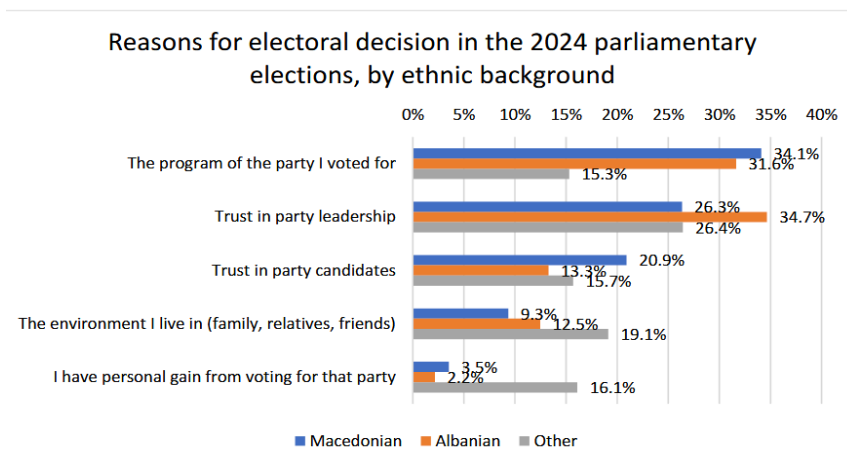


Ethnic, linguistic, and religious majority (i.e. the Macedonians) are happier than other ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups in the country – but the differences are rather narrow.

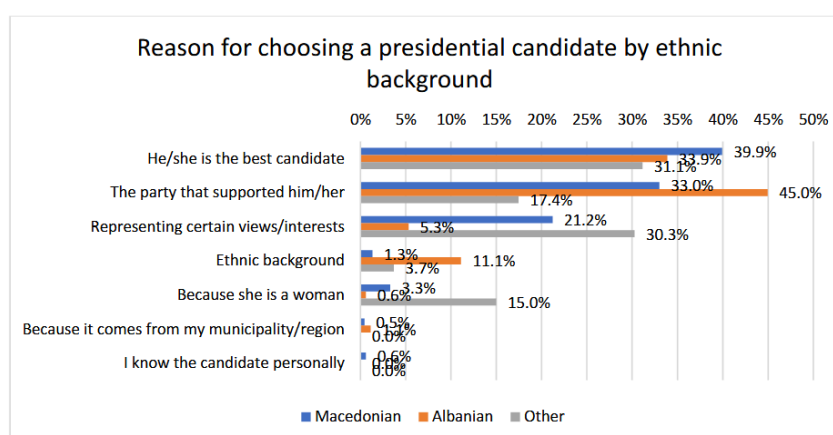
Source: ESS data, Round 10, 2022.



Source: ESS data, Round 10, 2022.



Source: CSES – Comparative study of electoral systems (2024).



Source: CSES – Comparative study of electoral systems (2024).

9. IDEALISTIC SUMMA SUMMARUM

- MAJORITY DEMOCRACY EQUALS:
 - LONG-TERM FUNCTIONALITY OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

- INTEGRATIVE AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETY
- TRUST AMONG SEGMENTS, POLITICAL ACTORS BUT ALSO CIVIL INDIVIDUALS
- CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
- COHERENCY OF THE SYSTEM AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND SOVEREIGNTY
- NEED FOR HIGH FORMAL ACCOUNTABILITY (AND JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY)
 - INCLUSION OF MECHANISMS FOR CONSISTENT UNBIASED APPRAISAL AND SANCTION OF INCUMBENTS – NECESSARY EXTERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN VETTING AND MONITORING, ESPECIALLY OF THE JUDICIARY
 - TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT IN UPHOLDING OF RULE OF LAW
- VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETY, ADEQUATE POLICIES AND JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY EQUALS:
 - ACCESS TO JUSTICE OF ALL INDIVIDUALS
 - CIVIL ENGAGEMENT
 - SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSION

Introduction

In the years following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, North Macedonia found itself at a crossroads of internal reconciliation and external aspiration. The cessation of armed hostilities between ethnic Albanian insurgents and Macedonian security forces—while a critical first step—did not by itself guarantee lasting peace or institutional resilience. Instead, the young republic's trajectory became inextricably linked to the European Union's own tumultuous enlargement and neighborhood policies. This paper weaves together North Macedonia's post-conflict evolution with two defining EU timeframes—2004–2014 and 2015–2025—to explore how shifting external incentives, diplomatic tools, and rule-of-law mechanisms shaped, and sometimes constrained, domestic security reforms. By reflecting on these intertwined narratives, we aim to chart a forward path that harnesses the rule of law as the keystone of genuine, self-sustaining stability.

From Battlefields to Brussels: 2004–2014 as a Catalyst for Reform

When North Macedonia was granted EU candidate status in December 2005, many observers saw a reward for its courageous end to internal conflict and a burgeoning commitment to minorities' rights. Yet on the ground, the promise of Brussels served as both carrot and compass: political elites accelerated reforms in the judiciary, overhauled police structures, and introduced community-policing pilots designed by EU mission experts. By 2008, visa-liberalization talks had begun in earnest, pushing authorities to upgrade biometric border controls and cooperate more closely with EUROPOL on trafficking rings that spanned the Balkans and beyond.

Narratively, this decade reads like a novel of transformation: a cautious police force evolved into a modern security service, absorbing best practices from EU trainers who emphasized human-rights compliance as much as crime prevention. Joint patrols along sensitive border crossings became symbols of "Europe at home" for many citizens—yet behind the scenes, reform momentum often faltered when EU fund disbursements stalled or when the judiciary resisted political interference. Thus, while 2004–2014 unquestionably accelerated institutional capacity, it also exposed a persistent dependence on external validation: when Brussels signaled disappointment, domestic reforms risked stalling until next year's progress report.

Negotiating Identity and Expectations: 2015–2025 and the Neighborhood Dilemma

The second chapter of this narrative unfolds against a backdrop of EU introspection. Faced with Brexit, internal democratic backsliding, and rising geopolitical rivalry, Brussels pivoted from enlargement towards a more transactional Neighborhood Policy. For North Macedonia, this produced both opportunity and ambiguity. The 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece—mediated under EU auspices—resolved the decades-long "name dispute," unlocking NATO membership and restoring momentum toward EU accession talks. Border-management cooperation deepened:

FRONTEX-backed training programs and cyber-security exercises offered practical security dividends.

Yet, the same period exposed the EU's reticence to enforce its own rule-of-law standards. Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty—the so-called “nuclear option” for sanctioning member states over democratic violations—remained unused despite mounting concerns over judicial independence in some capitals. In North Macedonia's neighborhood, this inaction sent mixed signals: if Brussels would not wield its stick against entrenched EU members, why should candidate or potential candidate states feel compelled to pursue politically sensitive reforms? This contradiction fueled skepticism among local stakeholders, who saw the Neighborhood Policy's diplomatic successes offset by a lack of credible enforcement.

Reflecting on “Conflict” and the Role of Rule of Law

Throughout both periods, “conflict” takes on layered meanings. The stark violence of 2001 gave way to a subtler contest: competing visions of governance, contested institutional leadership nominations, and the pull of political party or ethical based employments. Externally, the EU's own identity crisis and ambivalence over enlargement deadlines created a secondary “conflict” of stalled expectations. North Macedonia's people witnessed rapid external intervention—trainers, monitors, conditional funding—yet often lacked the space and resources to build genuinely independent institutions from within.

The rule of law emerges as the connective tissue between security and sustainable peace. When police are guided by transparent procedures, and when judges can decide cases free from political pressure, citizens' trust rises—and the underlying drivers of instability diminish. Conversely, when legal reform is perceived as a box-ticking exercise for Brussels rather than a homegrown necessity, fragile gains can unravel as soon as external attention shifts.

The SAFE 27 Mechanism and Charting a Way Forward

On 27 March 2025, the EU will unveil its SAFE 27 mechanism. Albania and North Macedonia, as the only eligible beneficiaries, stand at a pivotal juncture. SAFE 27 promises targeted capacity-building grants, peer-review assessments of judicial independence, and enhanced cooperation on organized crime. Yet if history is any guide, North Macedonia must guard against recreating past dependencies. To transform SAFE 27 into a genuine springboard rather than a safety net, policymakers and civil society should:

1. **Embed Ownership:** Ensure that all capacity-building projects originate from needs assessments led by local stakeholders—judges' associations, bar councils, police unions—rather than Brussels' technical experts alone.
2. **Strengthen Institutional Continuity:** Allocate a dedicated percentage of the national budget to maintain and expand reforms once EU funding sunsets, signaling political commitment beyond conditionality.

3. **Activate Regional Partnerships:** Engage OSCE, Council of Europe, and neighboring candidate states in peer networks that can provide both technical advice and mutual accountability.
4. **Advocate for Article 7's Neighborhood Equivalent:** Lobby Brussels to devise a credible, proportional sanctions mechanism for persistent rule-of-law breaches in candidate and neighbor countries—a Neighborhood Policy “Article 7” that accompanies carrots with enforceable sticks.

CLOSING REMARKS

North Macedonia's post-conflict journey is a story of aspirational leaps and cautious recalibrations. Its security reforms, woven together by community policing, joint patrols, and EU cooperation agreements, achieved considerable progress—yet they were never immune to the EU's own political rhythms.

To secure a stable European area in a globalized world, the rule of law must be more than a reform checklist: it must become the living fabric of society's governance. As SAFE 27 unfolds, North Macedonia has the opportunity to shift from conditional compliance to enduring ownership, crafting a future where security and justice advance hand in hand—regardless of Brussels' ever-changing horizon.

Distinguished guests, esteemed speakers, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, As we draw this insightful and timely conference to a close, it is my distinct honor to offer some concluding reflections on the rich discussions we've shared over the past [day/days]. We began with a series of compelling welcoming remarks that truly set the stage for our deliberations. Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, **Zoran Dimitrovski**, powerfully underscored the **rule of law as a strategic, non-negotiable priority for North Macedonia**, emphasizing that while external influences and internal erosion pose threats to democratic societies, there are no shortcuts on our nation's path towards EU membership.

This sentiment was echoed and expanded upon by our esteemed academic leaders. **Rector Igor Nedelkovski** of the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola, highlighted the **value of established bilateral cooperation**, proposing its expansion as a model for broader inter-university collaboration within North Macedonia. **Rector Jusuf Zejneli** from the State University of Tetova brought to the forefront the critical national priorities of **inclusiveness and social cohesion**, stressing the urgent need for judicial reforms, robust anti-corruption efforts, and a vital alignment between academic theory and practical societal needs.

Our international partners also provided crucial perspectives. **Ambassador Petra Drexler** of Germany called for the crucial **reform of peace and security mechanisms alongside deepened cooperation**, advocating for investment in Euro-American partnerships, a unified Europe, and critically, a renewed focus on the rule of law. Adding to this, **Ben Nupnau**, Deputy Chief of the EU Delegation in Skopje, painted a picture of our interconnected and vulnerable global context, warning how **corruption within the judiciary erodes societal resilience** and stressing the imperative for legitimate, accountable institutions to uphold the rule of law.

These opening statements provided a robust foundation for our panel discussions.

Panel 1, "The Evolving Security Landscape in a Globalized World – EU-NATO Cooperation in Times of Strategic Change," delved into the shifting dynamics of global security.

We heard about the necessity for **deeper EU-NATO cooperation** in a fragmented world, the challenges posed by rising transactionalism, and the urgent need for Europe to secure its own future through institutional reforms, such as rethinking qualified majority voting, as suggested by **Sebastian von Muenchow** who reminded us, "We are all in one boat." **Goran Ilikj** further explored shaping security in this multipolar era, while **Fatmir Xheladini** and **Elena TilovskaKechedji** raised critical concerns about the security risks of unregulated technological innovations, especially in AI and cybersecurity.

Panel 2, "The Rule of Law as a Foundation for Security in EU Candidate Countries," brought the core theme of our conference into sharp focus. **Vasko Naumovski** emphasized how EU integration supports internal unity and regional peace in these fragile times. **Nikola Dujovski** offered a nuanced reflection on the EU as a security actor and the dual nature of the rule of law – both a challenge and an opportunity for candidate countries. **Larisa Vasileska** eloquently described the rule of law as a secure framework benefiting all citizens, intrinsically linked to security and central to EU integration. **Betim Jahja** highlighted the corrosive impact of corruption on public trust and institutional development. The consensus was clear: the rule of law is an indispensable unifying and stabilizing factor.

Finally, **Panel 3, "Russia, the West, and the Future of European Security,"** tackled complex geopolitical tensions. **Albulena Halili** and **Dalibor Jovanovski** examined Russia's influence in the Western Balkans and noted other emerging interests in the region. **Massimo Pani** illuminated the "cognitive battleground" of disinformation, the erosion of trust in the digital age, and the profound implications of AI for the rule of law, calling for strategic foresight and the rebuilding of democratic "immunity." **Ivica Bocevski** provided a counterpoint, asserting no major current strategic threat in the Western Balkans, critiquing the EU's regional integration approach, and noting rising Euroscepticism. These diverse perspectives highlighted the complexities of navigating competing narratives and ensuring democratic resilience.

Distinguished guests, esteemed speakers, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,
As we draw this insightful and timely conference to a close, it is my distinct honor to offer some concluding reflections on the rich discussions we've shared over the past [day/days].
These are complex realities we must grapple with. And returning to the core themes of our conference, across all sessions, several key messages have resonated:

1. The **unwavering centrality of the Rule of Law** – not just as a precondition for EU membership, but as the bedrock of democratic societies, societal resilience, and lasting security.
2. The imperative for **enhanced, multifaceted Cooperation** – be it bilateral, inter-university, regional, EU-NATO, or Euro-American – to address shared challenges in an increasingly interconnected world.

3. The urgent need for **Strategic Adaptation and Foresight** – to navigate evolving security landscapes, address the impacts of new technologies like AI, combat disinformation, and bolster democratic institutions against both internal and external pressures.

Now, if I may, I'd like to add a personal reflection on some of these broader themes.

In my opinion, the topics we opened yesterday and today are more relevant than ever, primarily because we have a war on the continent. This conflict, by its sheer scale and destruction, is unprecedented since World War II, with the possible exception of the Korean War. The Kantian liberal ideal of international relations, envisioning a prohibition on the right to war, has not only failed to materialize in reality, but it seems every attempt at its realization boomerangs back on us.

In my lectures, I often tell my students that, despite many challenges, the European Union stands as perhaps the only truly successful large-scale project of liberalism. The economic growth and development of the USA over the last 150 years, which resulted in its supremacy after World War II and the decline of European states' influence (primarily due to their mutual conflicts), is a known historical pattern. Indeed, history shows the dominance of different states in different periods. However, the USA is a unique example on several grounds. Its access to two oceans and its practical dominion over global trade routes for the past 80 years reached a zenith in the period 1999-2008.

I would also like to highlight a crucial fact that perhaps we didn't emphasize enough: the geographical and historical factors. In this sense, we should remember that China and India are millennia-old empires with their own cycles of rise and fall. China, for instance, has not experienced a greater decline than the one that began in the 19th century and continued into the second half of the 20th. As it is said, "Whoever cannot look back at least 3,000 years in history lives from day to day."

BUT, what is also an undeniable fact is that Europe's geography dictates an immense interdependence and interconnectedness between Russia and other European states. This inevitably raises the question: can Europe build an autonomous, independent system by erecting a new "iron wall," not merely an "iron curtain"? I would argue that Europe may not have much choice in the matter. And, has the Union made mistakes in the Balkans? I would say yes. If you ask for my personal view, Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro should have been members by 2020.

Finally, regarding the question of whether European industry can respond to Russia's – I am convinced it can. However, the militarization of Russian society, contrasted with the ongoing liberalization of European societies, presents a challenge that currently seems difficult to bridge. I am referring to the readiness of, say, Spaniards, Italians, or Portuguese to collectively stand firm on Europe's eastern border. This is a question of societal will and preparedness that remains a significant hurdle.

The discussions have been frank, challenging, and immensely valuable. We have explored the threats, acknowledged the hurdles, but also reaffirmed our collective commitment to strengthening democratic principles and fostering a more secure and prosperous future.

As we leave here today, let us carry forward the insights gained, and the connections made. Let the dialogue continue, let our resolve be strengthened, and let our actions be guided by the principles we have discussed.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all our distinguished speakers for sharing their expertise and wisdom, to the organizers for their meticulous efforts in bringing this conference to fruition, and to each of you, the participants, for your active engagement and thoughtful contributions.

Thank you once again, and I wish you all a safe journey home.